

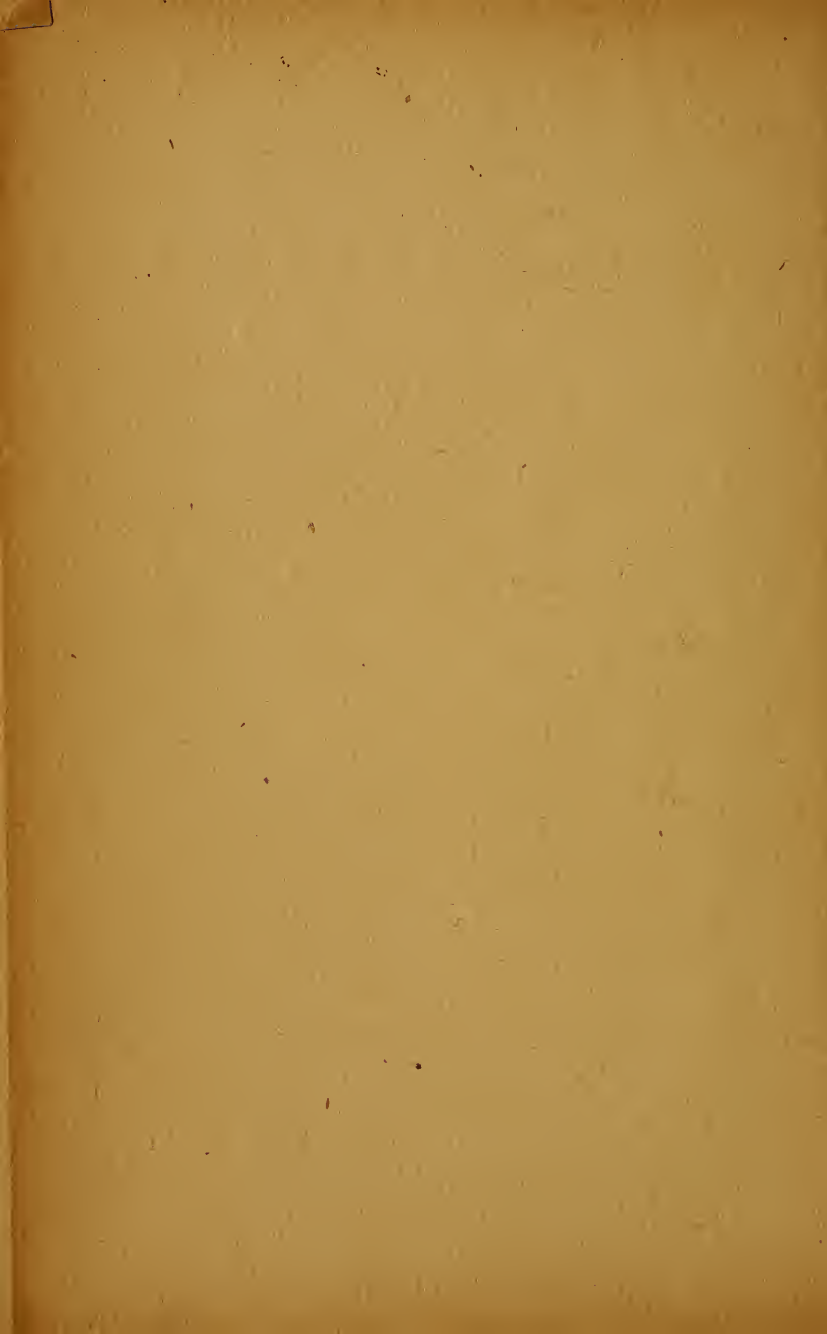
THE ERL QUEEN



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Dec 27/13

THE ERL QUEEN

BY

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CHICAGO:

M. A. DONOHUE & CO.

407-429 DEARBORN ST.

M. A. DONOHUE & COMPANY
PRINTERS AND BINDERS
407-429 DEARBORN STREET
CHICAGO



THE ERL QUEEN.

I.

ON grandmamma's brow the full moon was spinning new silver threads. The linden-trees were white with fragrant bloom and vocal with soft insect noises. Star-like blossoms rained down upon the golden heads of the children, now nestling around the dear old lady's knees and listening to her story :

"Once upon a time, there was a Prince, who did not know what the word Love might mean. He stood idly leaning against the marble window-casing of his northern castle and gazed at the dancing snow-flakes outside. The Prince sought their advice ; but they shook their tiny crystal faces, and hurried away. Then he looked up at

the clouds, as they spread their wings high over the eaves of his castle, and sighed : ' Daughters of the storm-king, can you tell me where I can find Love ? ' But the clouds were grave and silent ; they vouchsafed no answer, and flew hastily away to their birth-mansion, the wild romantic mountains, whose crests are the foundations of the sky. ' I know where Love is,' ventured a timid sun-beam, as it crept stealthily through the seams of the clouds. ' It is too cold and dull up here, where melancholy reigns and where the storm scatters the rose-leaves before the flower has time to unfold. Love needs warmth and flowers, light and splendor ! Come with me to the cradle of poetry, and inhale the fragrance of groves in which the muses make their dwelling ! Wind laurel-wreaths around thy brow and kiss the lips that chant a song of passionate yearning ! Look up to the shining sky and seek oblivion in the firmament of love ! There you will find it, the love that lives in the sphere of light ! ' The heart of the northern Prince throbbed with a strange, unconquerable longing, and he darted away through snow and ice to find the land of the sun. But its fierce glow dazzled his sight ; his senses grew numb

with the odor of flowers, and the music of the mandoline brought to his eyes the tears of an unknown sorrow. The sky glistened and sparkled like a great proud eye that knows nothing of compassion. The northern Prince shivered amidst the splendors of a paradise of blooming branches and tuneful birds, like a famished creature. With his hands upon his stifled breast, he sighed for a breath of fresh crisp northern air. Weary and homesick he fled from the land of happiness without having once found Love. Once more the storm-winds of his native heath blew keen around his temples; the sea thundered and surged against its lonely cliffs, and the branches of the oaks were covered with the early green of returning spring. The eyes of the young Prince filled with tears of joy as he wound his arms around the mighty trunk of the German tree, and stretched them out with a loving greeting for the house of his fathers in the distance. Suddenly an invisible hand brushed aside the overhanging branches, and a tall, slender maiden stood before the astonished youth. She had come to meet him with softly noiseless footsteps. From her brow rippled the pure gold of the sun; her white throat gleamed like the myrtle-blossom of the

tropics, and in her eyes shone sparkling innocence. The Prince's soul leapt out at the enchantment; his heart throbbed madly as he drew near the fairy vision. He gazed deep into those truthful eyes, and cried with wondering delight: "'Tis thou, oh Love, *my* love! '—"

Grandmother ceased to speak. The shining eyes of the girl at her feet hung spell-bound on the face of the narrator; but the little curly head in her lap had dropped, the silky lashes were painting shadows on the rosy cheeks. The old lady arose softly, and carried the little sleeper to his downy nest inside the forester's lodge.

In the shadow of the linden-tree stood Norbert, and stared at the simple house. The words "'Tis thou, oh Love, *my* love!" rang in his ear. He brushed the thick, soft curls thoughtfully from his forehead. Had he found it?

"Norbert," whispered a piping voice by his side, "won't you come in with us? It is growing late, and father will soon be home. He likes to find us all in bed, you know!"

"But you are a little girl, and must go to bed early," replied the young man. "I'll stay up awhile longer and stroll through the forest to meet my uncle. Good night, little Anna!"

The little girl raised herself on tip-toe, and stretched out a pair of tiny arms, which she wound tenderly around the young man's neck : " Good-night, Norbert ! " A hearty kiss sealed the leave-taking. " Be sure and call me early in the morning before you go, will you ? "

" Of course I will, " promises her cousin, straightening himself to his full height, " and when I come back from my cruise I'll bring you a basket of beautiful shells and a real, live parrot ! "

Little Anna laughed with delight at the joyful prospect, and darted away, like a moonbeam, over the gravel path, vanishing in the shadow of the lodge. Norbert paused for a moment, before directing his foot-steps toward the silent woods.





II.

“ and seest thou not
The Erl King's daughter in yon dim spot ? ”

THE branches of the beech-trees whispered, as if they were talking in their sleep. The wood-path was broad and mossy, lined on both sides with picturesque rocks and stones over which slender ferns nodded drowsily, and blackberry-bushes and brambles sighed in the evening breeze. The hedge-roses were in full bloom, and the fragrance of myriads of wood-blossoms, hidden in the moss, filled the air. A constant chirping and rustling was going on in tree-tops, and in the hazelnut-bushes down in the valley a nightingale was singing her evening hymn.

Norbert sauntered slowly down the hill. “ Nonsense—about that fairy-tale ! ” said he to himself, shaking his head decidedly. “ Love ! Nonsense—what is love to *me* ? ” And with his fresh

young baritone voice he chanted the refrain:
"Farewell to thee, my own dear love!"

The moonlight dwelt like a vapor around the dark fir-trees; a night-moth flapped its careless wings across the path, and from the valley blew a breeze that rocked the grasses of the glen, like seaweed, to and fro. The forest began to clear and ended in a fringe of soaring oak-trees.

A narrow valley wound around the foot of the hill, intersected by the gurgling waters of a brook whose banks were lined with silvery alders and willow-trees. Their trunks emerged from the gray fog like apparitions, spectral and romantic; little hump-backed gnomes whose fleshless arms gesticulated wildly in the clover-dell. Owls passed over Norbert's head with startled screech and disappeared in the gloom; croaking voices of toads piped from the marsh below. Suddenly a bright light rent the fog-veil for a moment, a spark emerged from behind the alders and danced about in the branches like a gleam of lightning.

"A Will-o'-the-wisp!" exclaimed Norbert. "Wait, little fellow, till I catch you!" and like a deer he bounded down the hill and over the meadow.

"Will-o'-the-wisp, wait for me, wait!"

The spark really seemed to pause, and grew larger and more distinct, as Norbert drew near. At last he caught up with it. What was it? This does not look like a will-o'-the-wisp! It is a simple candle in a lantern.

"Who's there?" came the haughty voice of a child. "Go back to the castle immediately, and don't attempt to drive me away from here! You have nothing to say to me at all. I will do exactly as I please, for I am the mistress of Altingen!"

The last words were spoken with calm defiance. The light drew quickly near, and before the astonished Norbert stood the small frail form of a girl in a white, trailing night-gown, the folds of which she carried carelessly on her arm, revealing the little bare feet of a child.

"Who are you?" queried the small, shrill voice, as the light fell full upon Norbert's handsome, boyish face. "I don't know you! What do you want?"

"I believed—I—I thought—I saw a will-o'-the-wisp!" stammered the youth, greatly perplexed. "I had no idea that I should meet a human being in such a place at this hour of the night!"

The child laughed a short, shrill laugh. "Nobody has, not even the folks at the castle, for they must never know how often I come hither. But I

love the clover-dell, and as I am here all day long, what is the harm if I sometimes come at night? It is nobody's business. Do you hear?"

The child dropped her arm, and the light fell full on her face. Norbert scanned the singular vision with burning curiosity. How strange! On the slender throat of a girl seemed to perch the head of a boy. Golden curls fell to her shoulders, but over the forehead the hair was closely cropped. Large, proud eyes illumined a childish face, and around the delicate lips self-will had already begun to draw its urgent lines.

"And who are you?" questioned the young man timidly.

"Don't you know *me*?" was the proud retort, and the little head was thrown back with a defiant stare. "I am the Erl Queen! The clover-dell is my kingdom; yonder willow-trunk that hangs over the water is my throne! Either you are very stupid, or else you are a stranger!" Her large eyes scanned the youth's face narrowly. "Don't you know that Castle Altingen lies over there behind these oak-trees?"

"No," replied Norbert, and a chill ran through him, when he heard the name of the 'Erl Queen' mentioned.

"Where do you live, and what is your name?" continued the child impatiently.

"I am here on a visit to my grandmother, who lives over yonder in the hunting-lodge, and my name is Norbert de Sangoulème. I happened to be strolling through the woods to meet my uncle, who is the forest-keeper."

"De Sangoulème?" repeated the girl with a soft accent. "It is a French name? How came you to Germany?"

Norbert shook his head. "I am a German, despite my foreign name," was his rejoinder.

"But how can this be?" persisted she, with the air of a spoilt wilful child.

"My mother, who is the forest-keeper's sister, was a governess in France," explained the lad obediently, "and became acquainted with my father there. They were married, and when I was two years old my father died. My mother returned to Germany after his death, and I was brought up in this country. She also has been taken from me since then, and tomorrow I am going far away from here to become a naval cadet."

"She was a governess?" repeated Erl Queen disdainfully, "and you are going to be a *cadet*? Pray, why not a *lieutenant*?"

“That’s just what I hope to be made, in time. Pray, who was *your* mother then, that you speak so disparagingly of governesses?”

His tone was no less cutting than her own had been.

“A Countess of Saaleck-Hardenberg!” came with chilling pride from the lips of the child, “and I am Ruth of Altingen; yonder castle is mine. Just at present my step-mother makes believe that she is mistress there. She has just come back from the city, and has turned every thing topsy-turvy: even the towers are to be stripped of their beautiful wild roses and ivy-vines. But I will not permit it, I’ll scratch her eyes out—if she dares!” The voice of the child grew loud and harsh, her face was dark and threatening.

“How came they to let you come all alone to the clover-dell at midnight?” asked Norbert with a dubious motion of the head.

Little Ruth flung the curls from her face with a sarcastic smile.

“What a funny question! As if any one at the castle suspected such a thing! No indeed, I stole away to gather the ‘nine herbs,’ for this is St. John’s night!” explained she softly. “Mamma would not let me come in the afternoon, because

my governess had to help arrange the dinner-table for the party, and she insists that it is not proper for me to go strolling through the woods alone, but I took my slippers off in the wet grass, so that they will not find them damp in the morning!" The child loosened the folds of her gown, and disclosed a pair of tiny red shoes and a bunch of alder-branches, which she had hidden under her dainty white robe.

Norbert laughed aloud. "If you lay these herbs under your pillow your dream will be fulfilled. Is it not so?" asked he.

She nodded. "Are you looking for some also?"

"Shall I?"

"Yes, indeed! 'twill be so funny! And tomorrow you must meet me here, and tell me of your dream. Will you?"

"Tomorrow I start for Kiel," replied Norbert dejectedly; and for the first time the lad felt sorry that he was going away.

"How stupid!" chided Ruth obdurately. "I want you first to tell me of your dream."

"I'll be back in a couple of years, and then I'll tell you!"

She made a little grimace and turned on her heel. "I am going home now," said she curtly.

"All alone? Are you not afraid?"

Ruth stared at him wonderingly. "Afraid? In my clover-dell?" and she shrugged her shoulders as if she doubted his sanity.

"What are you doing?" cried Norbert suddenly, and seized the child by the arm; the Erl Queen had pushed the willow-branches aside, and her little foot went splashing into the water.

"I am going to wade through the brook!" answered she laconically.

"But I have my top-boots on and will carry you over!"

With a swift side-glance the little girl measured the tall, commanding form by her side. "Then you *are* good for something, Norbert de Sangoulème," she smiled. "But you don't know these waters. Come with me further up the stream, where the bed is more even." She caught his hand with childish unconcern and led him along the grassy bank. Near a tall alder she halted. "Will you carry me now?" cried she. Her great clear eyes were fixed on Norbert's face. Without replying to her plea the lad stooped and lifted the small white form tenderly in his arms. The night mist had made the muslin folds damp and limp; the broad lace trimmings fell caressingly

over Norbert's hand, and the little gold chain that hung around the child's throat gleamed in the moonlight. It seemed to Norbert as if a water-sprite was nestling against his breast. He waded slowly through the shallow stream and carried his fair burden a little beyond the mossy bank, before setting her down.

"Thank you," said Ruth, holding out her hand to him. "I am almost at home!" As she spoke she lifted the lantern higher, so that its light fell full on Norbert's face—it was a moment of sharp, brief scrutiny! "Make haste and become an officer! A naval cadet is but little better than a common sailor. Nobody respects him, and, besides, they would be sure to give you the cold shoulder at Castle Altingen! When you are a lieutenant, come and see me again!"

"Do you ever go to the lodge?"

Erl Queen shook the golden curls from her face. "No. Mademoiselle Marion says that the people there are no company for me; for they haven't even a lackey to serve coffee! But..." Ruth seemed to reflect a moment—"I'll go there some time unknown to them, just on account of the dogs, Nimrod and Diana. I like them very much. Anyway, I can do as I please! I need

ask nobody's advice—for I am the mistress of Altingen !”

Self-will and defiance were depicted in every line of the childish face. With a swift movement she secreted the alder-branches in the folds of her gown and held out her hand for the second time to Norbert. “Don't forget the ‘nine herbs,’” she whispered, “there is no nonsense in that ! Farewell !”

For a moment Norbert pressed the childish fingers in his own. “Farewell, Erl Queen,” said he, “I shall dream of you !”

She gave him a little wistful smile, nodded and turned away. “Good-night !” It came back to him.

Norbert stood rooted to the spot, watching the little white figure as it flitted, phantom-like, through the bushes and trees ; once more the light from her lantern flashed through the deepening shadows, then all vanished behind the fir-trees.

The youth began to wend his way slowly back to the stream. “If I had any faith in fairy-tales,” said he to himself, “I would swear I had met a real elf ; but it's all a myth about the fairies. I am no longer a credulous child.”

Buried in profound thought he sauntered away in the soft, warm summer-night. Mysterious voices whispered in the branches of the oaks; fire-flies brushed the mossy ground, and the ferns by the way-side nodded to him as he went. Norbert stopped often in his solitary ramble and thought of the Prince, who did not know where to find Love!—

On the following morning a lonely wanderer stood on the mountain-road, awaiting the coming of the lumbering post-chaise. He shaded his eyes with his hands and peered down the road, whence it must appear. Growing impatient at last, he started to meet the old conveyance.

Just at this point the road described a sharp curve, and descended abruptly toward the valley. Norbert paused in amazement: vivid interest was depicted in his handsome young face, fully justified by the scene that spread out before him. Behind the nearest oak-grove arose an ancient hunting-chalet. The massive gray walls formed a perfect square, great round turrets finishing each corner. A wide trench, now perfectly dry but thickly overgrown with reed-grass, wound around the castle-walls. A draw-bridge of heavy oaken planks spanned the old-fashioned ditch.

Ivy-vines and hedge-roses twined in wild confusion over the entire western front of the castle, and lent to the idyllic structure the air of a "Dorn-roeschen" palace. Nothing but the glaring flag that was flying over one of the towers dispelled the illusion of a mythical royal burgh. Norbert drank in the beauty of the scene with keen delight. Two splendid deer, hewn in stone, were couched at either side of the entrance, and a pair of chatting lackeys were busily engaged in harnessing a pair of handsome bays to the family carriage, signs which left Norbert no longer in doubt that he had before him castle Altingen, the home of his new friend, the little Erl Queen. With the exception of a handful of servants who moved lazily about, the inmates of the castle seemed still asleep. The morning sun threw golden lights over the blooming hedge; the fresh tracks of carriage-wheels in the road told of the late departure of the guests on the previous night; and, buried in her downy pillows, Ruth's beautiful step-mother was dreaming of the gay capital and the pleasures that awaited her there.

The bugle-song of the post-horn came through the still air and awoke the young man from his reverie; the creaking coach drew up before the

castle-gates. A lackey came running down the broad flight of stairs and over the court-yard with a leather mail-bag which he handed to the driver. The whip cracked merrily over the heads of the team, and the vehicle sped out of sight behind a cluster of tall oak-trees.

“Farewell, Erl Queen! *Auf Wiedersehen!*” cried Norbert in a ringing voice, as he waved his hat to the driver and swung himself on the box-seat; and for a long while afterwards the refrain from Norbert’s favorite air rang through the sun-lit woods: “Farewell to thee, my own dear love!”





III.

TIME plies its checkered wings, and speedy years have flown already. The winter snow has melted and is gone. The clover-dell is green and sweet, and sunshiny. Meadows are studded with flowers and blossoms, and the yellow dust of the catkins glitters among the alder-leaves. From the road in the valley sounds again the note of the post-horn. A crackling, rustling noise comes through the oak-woods, as if a deer was cutting a path for himself. Nearer and nearer comes the noise, then a man's hand brushes aside the last obstructing branches.

"God's greeting, clover-dell!" cries a fresh, young voice, and, with his hands shading his eyes the boisterous wanderer emerges from the closely-growing trees. His is a tall, commanding form. Over a broad and massive chest opens a sailor's blouse; two dark, beaming eyes look honestly and bravely on the world—true sailor's eyes!—

The young man checks his pace, drops his head

upon his breast, and gazes dreamily at the slender path at his feet. Long-forgotten scenes come to life again in the bright, warm sunshine. He hears the roaring of the sea and the howling of the storm-wind around the towers of a northern castle. He looks back unregretfully upon the beauties of southern climes, for he, too, is a prodigal homeward bound, who has gone forth to meet Love and has not found it! Staunch sails have carried him around the world; palms and cedars have shadowed his brow; strange, wondrous pictures have come and gone before his vision. Songs full of oriental fire have cajoled his senses, passionately glowing lips have beckoned him. The splendor of the tropics has, serpent-like, wound its coils around him—but he broke away from these enchanting scenes, and steered for his northern home, where magic castles slumber in shady oak-groves, and the will-o'-the-wisp dances through phantom dells.

Suddenly the dreamer is startled from his reverie and stands spell-bound. "I beg your pardon!" is all he can find time to utter.

From the low trunk of an old alder-tree sprang a young lady and quickly advanced toward him.

"My pardon? Because I have frightened you,

Monsieur Norbert de Sangoulème," says the young girl with suppressed merriment. "It gave me pleasure so to do," continued she, and broke into a low melodious peal of laughter. "Perhaps you were thinking of the ghost-stories of the clover-dell?"

"If you refer to the Erl Queen, I stand convicted," retorted the young man gaily. "Besides, I am a sailor, prone to believe in nymphs and water-sprites. You know me then? On a certain moonlight night I carried a little child in my arms across this stream. Many years have passed since then, but my memory is good. You are the Baroness Altingen!"

Ruth brushed the curls from her forehead. "It is not a bit flattering to me that you should recognize me so promptly," said she banteringly, with a bright side-glance, "for they tell me that when I was a child I was as homely as a goblin, and you saluted me with such evident alarm that I might resent it if I were vain."

"Do you not know that overwhelming joy has often the same effect?" The girl turned her head abruptly and looked full into Norbert's face. A little willow-sprig slipped from her hair and fell among the daisies at his feet.

"Oh, yes," she laughed coyly, "as you will have occasion to observe directly! Come with me to grandmother at the lodge, where every room is being white-washed and scrubbed, where each hearth is littered, and the guest-chamber packed to the doors with furniture, bedding and disused winter-garments, awaiting anything but a guest! What eyes these good people will make when they behold the circumnavigator of the globe, Norbert de Sangoulème, whom they imagine still among the savages!"

Norbert looked amusedly at the dainty prattler before him. "I hope grandmother remembers that a sailor can always sleep in a hammock? I'll find a place where I can pitch my tent. But how come you to know so well what is going on at the lodge? Is there a lackey now to serve the coffee?"

A vivid blush spread over Ruth's delicate face. "That reminds me of what I said once upon a time," replied she, balancing her riding-whip on her forefinger. "Formerly, I confess, I did not like the lodge, but ever since meeting you I have been almost a daily guest there. Your cousin Anna is just my age, and we get on very well together. This coming winter she is to accompany me to Berlin."

“Anna—going to Berlin? What will madame your mother say to such a project?”

Norbert's beautiful eyes were fixed on the countenance of the young Baroness. Defiance hardened her delicate mouth, as on that moonlight night so long ago.

“My parents will spend the winter in the South, because papa has been in ill-health for some time. I am to occupy their town-house, and be introduced to society under the chaperonage of the Countess Lersneck. It depends, of course, entirely upon me whether this project is carried out or not, but of one thing I am sure—Anna must go with me and take regular singing-lessons. And now, come! I would like nothing better, than to go with you at once to the lodge, and witness the reception that awaits you there. But I must first go back to Altingen and have a guest-chamber prepared for you. You will have to be my guest for a few days, M. de Sangoulème, Anna and the little Hans are with me also.”

Without awaiting his reply Ruth hastened in advance of him across the meadow. Norbert attempted to protest against her last decision, but Ruth of Altingen was not the woman to brook an interference with her plans. Aware of the

fact that remonstrance would be useless, he followed her in silence.

Ruth's appearance was as attractive as it was unusual. A riding-habit of dark heavy cloth fitted her graceful figure to perfection. The long train of the skirt hung loosely over her arm. In her hand she carried her gauntlets and whip. Her hair curled in golden ringlets around her lovely brow, the ends being confined in a loose knot at the back. A little alder-sprig with long, shining leaves wound through the beautiful coils. Her eyes were grayish-blue and wonderfully large. They reminded Norbert of a painting he had seen of the mystic nymph of the Rhine, who made the young knight her helpless slave with just such mysterious, fathomless eyes. Tied to the trunk of a tree, not far away, a beautiful roan was grazing the luxuriant grass.

"Do you see my faithful friend, Suwaroff?" cried Ruth, turning back toward Norbert, and pointing with her whip in the direction of the horse. "Papa gave him to me last Christmas, because my little pony had grown too old for service. Do you ride, M. de Sangoulème?"

Norbert nodded his head in assent.

"I am very fond of it, although a sorry horse-

man. On board-ship riding is an idle dream, as far removed as the often longed-for land."

"It must be terribly dull in such a floating prison!" rejoined Ruth, shrugging her shoulders with fine disdain. "There is no life at sea—save rats: the only thing aboard ship with an opinion of its own is the barometer, and the interest revolves around the compass! I'm sure *I* could never be a sailor!"

"You judge wrongly, Baroness!" Sangou-lème's eyes gleamed with a bright proud light. "Life under the sails seems dull to those only who have no mental occupation. The man who needs for recreation and amusement boisterous pleasures and an ever-fitful existence, who exacts from the world a constant succession of new scenes that dazzle the eye and excite the senses; who is ever on the alert to see, to enjoy and to retire *blasé*—to such an one the sea is both a prison and a tomb, never one of God's broad, fertile acres! I myself am never dull or lonely when at sea. When out at sea we had always plenty of work to do to occupy our thoughts. There were storms and roaring waves that sang the mysterious psalms of eternity, diverting the mind from trivial things to higher aims and ob-

jects than the mere pleasure-diary of calm, bright days ! There were quiet seas expanding into measureless breadth from horizon to horizon ; majestic nights with brilliant constellations ; nights dim with mystic fogs ; nights through which the thunders roared and lightnings flashed ! And finally, Baroness Altingen, there was the end of all such cruises ! Is there anything more interesting, more exciting than to see land heave in sight at last, to wander in reality through the enchanting scenes that have filled one's dreams ? From the lonely island in broad mid-ocean the ship carries her crew to the lively, noisy sea-port with its bustle and its busy marts, where all nations, all tongues, and all the splendors of the universe have their abiding-place. In truth, no painter could reproduce such a scene ! I wish, Baroness, you could make just one trip with us, and I feel sure you would never again pity the sailor's lot, nor speak disparagingly of his calling ! ”

The young cadet stood with gleaming eyes before Ruth of Altingen. His noble profile was sharply outlined against the dark back-ground of firs ; enthusiasm had driven a becoming flush to his brow, and his commanding figure seemed to

grow taller with the breath that swelled his breast, as he ceased to speak. After a pause he continued, with a smile: "And the rats? Thank Heaven, when they stay with us: 't were as well that we should be devoured by them, as that they should forsake us!"

They had drawn near Ruth's beautiful roan. The lady of Altingen placed her hand caressingly on the noble creature's neck. Her bright eyes were riveted upon the face of the speaker, to whose words she had listened as eagerly as a child drinks in its favorite fairy-tale.

"You must tell me more of your travels, much more, everything! You talk delightfully, and bring the charm of foreign countries before my very eyes! And," added she roguishly, "when a mariner has an imaginative soul and enthusiastic tongue for telling his adventures, besides his profound love for the sea and his 'rats,' I'll swear allegiance to his flag!"

Ruth caught the reins with one hand, and was about to put her dainty foot in the stirrup. Norbert sprang to her side and extended his hand. The girl accepted the proffered help without ceremony, and for a moment her fingers rested on Norbert's shoulder.

“Thank you ! I’m off ! one, two—three ! Do you see ? But if you wish to earn the grand-cross, hand me my hat that lies on the grass—behind you ! Thanks !” She took it from his hand and placed it gaily on her curls, nodding to Norbert with a cordial smile. Her whip touched Suwaroff’s shining neck, and with the swiftness of an arrow he carried his fair burden across the emerald meadow.

Norbert gazed a long time after Ruth ; suddenly he jerked about, turned and ran down the stony woodland path. Her last words sounded in his ears, he saw the clever bright eyes searching his face, and felt the soft little hand lying in his own.

“On her brow fell the light of the sun, her throat was white as the myrtle-blossom, and in her eyes the blue of Heaven was reflected !” It was grandmother’s voice that Norbert fancied he heard, reciting her fairy-tales under the blooming linden-tree. “And the Prince exclaimed with joyous delight : ‘It is you, oh Love, *my* love !’”

“It is you, oh Love, *my* love !” faltered Norbert softly, as he paused and cast a yearning look in the direction of the clover-dell. “Erl Queen, the Prince knows *now* where he must seek his happiness.”

The golden sun-rays glinted through the woods ; the breeze, soft as the breath of May, brushed caressingly over the budding leaves, and in the clearing the new-born flowers peeped from below the old dry leaves of Autumn.

Through the greenery flashed myriads of glittering wings ; gnats danced in busy swarms, and ringing warbling voices round about united in one mighty choir of springtide joy.





IV.

"WELL, Grossmütterchen, what did you all say to the new messmate from Pernambuco?" cried Baroness Ruth gaily across the gravel square, gathering her skirts closely around her, and threading a veritable bulwark of washing-troughs and tubs.

"Good afternoon, dear Fräulein Ruth!" replied the old lady, smoothing her white apron with both hands. "Excuse these barricades! And into all this confusion comes our darling lad! I could hardly trust my eyes, when he stood suddenly before me, so tall and handsome! But, oh! what joy it was!" And with the memory of the happy moment still upon her, the old lady wiped the rising tears from her eyes. She pressed the young girl's hand warmly, and greeted her with a most cordial smile.

"I met him in the clover-dell!" said Ruth in her frank outspoken way. "And on account of all this turmoil I asked him to spare you any more anxiety, and send his trunk at once to Altingen. Bah!" cutting short grandmother's embarrassed remonstrances, "the guest-chambers at the castle are on dress-parade from one year's end to the other, and it will be a comfort to hear a human footstep overhead. But where is the great traveler?" Hurriedly scanning the grounds, "Anna must have been back this long while?"

"They have gone down to the Beech-grove to surprise my son," explained the old lady, patting the head of the great boarhound, whose clever, faithful eyes were raised to the face of the speaker. "My son will be a statue of surprise, when Norbert comes upon him suddenly!"

"Surprise indeed," laughed Ruth merrily, "our mariner is wearing his uniform. I do not censure him, for it is exceedingly becoming. Ah, here comes my little friend Hans with the inevitable slice of bread and butter! Come, little man—'cuckoo!'—Come here!"

And with a charming air Ruth hid her head behind grandmother's back. Hans shouted with delight, and precipitated his small person upon

the lady of Altingen, to wind his dimpled arms adoringly around her knees.

“Child, your dirty fingers—the beautiful dress!” cried the old lady in alarm, and endeavored to check his attentions. But Ruth was already on her knees before the little savage, and pressed a hearty kiss on his pouting lips, while with her right hand she planted a slap on the boarhound’s nose, who was making bold advances upon the piece of bread in the child’s hands.

“What do you mean, Hassan? You have just dined at Altingen. No, Hans, don’t give him a bite, I want him to stop this begging habit!”

“But I like Hassan, Aunt Ruth!” beseeched the little man, and wound his arms tenderly around the dog’s neck. “He is so big and wild, and, just think of it, he can eat a whole dish full of potatoes at a time!” Hans severed piece after piece from his slice and fed his fourfooted friend.

“You won’t have any left for your coffee, poor child!” cried Ruth, and fumbled in her pocket. “I’ll have to find a substitute—guess what I have?—the right or the left hand?”

“Candies! Yes, candies! Both hands, please!” begged the little diplomatist, and proceeded to

dig from Ruth's hands the sweet mystery with dancing eyes and busy fingers. "Oh, thank you! Thank you!" And again he presented his fresh young mouth to be kissed.

"It's too bad, Fräulein Ruth, that I cannot even bake a cake to celebrate Norbert's return!" murmured the old lady. "He should have notified us of his coming, then I could have disposed of the work here in the grounds at least, and baked him one of his favorite dishes: at any rate, some waffles."

"Oh!" sighed little Hans from the bottom of his heart.

"Waffles!" exclaimed Baroness Altingen eagerly. "I can bake them. Do you see, Grossmütterchen, how every good deed is its own reward! It was you who taught me the noble art of waffle-baking, and I am going to do you credit to-day! Permit me to assume the rôle of the good house-wife. Oh, please, please! I know where everything is kept! There is a fire in the stove, let us make haste—hurrah!—by coffee-time I shall be ready!"

"Hurrah!" reiterated little Hans, and licked his lips in anticipation of the prospect.

Before grandmother had time for further remon-

strances on account of the handsome dress and the delicate hands, the girl had taken off her gloves. Together with her hat she threw them on one of the benches, skipped over the wash-tubs that stood in her way, and ran toward the house, followed by Hans and Hassan.

The kitchen was soon alive with merry bustle. The Baroness Altingen tucked up her dress and donned a white kitchen-apron. She set to work at once among the flour, the butter and the eggs. Her dainty fingers handled the utensils deftly.

Hans, like a would-be busy goblin, skipped hither and thither, fetching one thing and another to assist Ruth in the waffle-baking. Hassan made a dignified audience of one, as he sat by the stove, pricking his ears, or snapping at some importunate fly that disturbed his meditations.

"Now then, the batter is ready!" exclaimed Ruth, and clapping her hands rejoicingly. "You may set the dish on the stove, Hans, the iron is hot."

The little man was thoroughly imbued with the sense of his importance. He caught the bowl between his chubby hands, and set it carefully down by the side of Ruth.

The Lady of Altingen managed her task with

charming dexterity, and soon heaps of steaming pastry began to fill the old-fashioned cake-dish. Hans watched the harvest with glittering eyes.

At last the task was completed. The cooks scrutinized their delicate work.

"I say . . . Aunt Ruth!" began the little man urbanely.

"What is it, my boy?"

"Oughtn't we to *taste* them?"

"Taste them? Oh, no. I am thankful if there is enough of them as it is! What kind of rations, do you think, a sailor is used to, you Lilliputian! I am quite sure your cousin Norbert will look upon this mountain of waffles as a mere foretaste—for sailors eat like bears!" Ruth gave the sugar-box an energetic shake, and sprinkled the sweet snow over the crisp, brown waffles.

"Like bears?" mused the little Hans dejectedly. "Then there won't be any left for us, Aunt Ruth, and we did the baking. Please, please, just a single one, Aunt Ruth, that I may know, at least, how they taste!"

"It may not turn out quite as bad as that," said Ruth, calming the fears of her little comrade.

"I'll see that you have your share, little man!"

But Hans had grown distrustful and thought

of the bears in his picture book and their notorious appetite.

"Look here, Aunt Ruth, here are two burnt pieces," he faltered, trying his fortune anew.

"Burnt, you silly child, not a bit of it!" frowned the mistress of Altingen, piqued at this unfavorable criticism of her labor of love. But a moment later she looked relentingly at her small companion. "Call it browned my boy, do you hear? But you are right, they *don't* look just exactly right. Monsieur Norbert might likewise think them burnt, for men know nothing of the higher art of cooking. Well, Hans"—Erl Queen debated a moment longer—"suppose we taste these two, just to make the dish look better!" she added, to excuse her change of tactics.

Hans helped himself with beaming eyes; his little teeth sank deep into the dainty crust, and he danced around Ruth in childish glee.

The Baroness of Altingen forgot for the time being the dignity of her sixteen years, and munched away heartily at the crisp, brown pastry. She balanced herself on tip-toe, and jumped to a risky seat on the very edge of the kitchen-table.

Suddenly Hassan's bark rang through the kitchen. In an instant he was at the door,

before which he stationed himself ready for the attack.

“A pleasant repast!” In the door-way stood Norbert, tall and handsome. He pushed Hassan gently aside and entered.

It was plain to be seen that Norbert had a struggle to appear grave. A merry twinkle was in his eyes, and his lips twitched with suppressed laughter. The effort drove the tell-tale blood to his forehead.

“Divide, good comrade!” quoted he saucily. “May I join the party, Baroness Altingen?”

At first Ruth was inclined to hide behind her back the hand that held the half-consumed waffle. She pressed her lips tightly together in evident embarrassment. But her composure returned in a moment, and, breaking into one of her merry peals of laughter, she continued devouring her waffle.

“Thou comest at a goodly hour, oh, wanderer!” cited she merrily. “But to avenge the bold surprisal, M. de Sangoulème, we ought to eat our waffles alone. Divided joy is double joy, however, and I am not an egotist. I am glad to be able to offer you a whole dish full of ‘hearts’!”

“Hearts?” repeated Norbert with a rapid glance

into her eyes. "Then I must not be slow in helping myself—may I have this pretty, golden-brown one? I will not fail immediately to demonstrate how well I like your pastry!"

"Yes, Aunt Ruth says that sailors eat like bears!" blurted out little Hans excitedly. A second later he ran away with a howl—the Baroness Altingen had silenced his tell-tale tongue, too late, by pinching his arm.

"No harm done," laughed Norbert, amused at this little by-play; he waved his waffle triumphantly in the air. In the door-way stood Anna, fortunately giving the conversation another turn.

"Where can I wash my hands?" asked Ruth, looking helplessly about. Hans slid underneath the kitchen-table, whence he emerged a moment later with a large tin-basin and a piece of brown soap. "Here!" he exclaimed eagerly, "here is our Trina's wash-bowl!"

"Fie!" exclaimed the Lady of Altingen, and drew in the folds of her dress.

"Hans, are you in your senses?" said Anna, in mild rebuke. "How can you offer Fräulein Ruth such a thing?" Norbert stood by and laughed aloud.

"Do not scold my little man!" interposed

Ruth, already mollified. "He meant well, at any rate! Come, Hans, let's go to the pump!"

Hans took hold of her outstretched hand and drew the Erl Queen away with him.

"Come along, Uncle Norbert, you can do the pumping!" he shouted over his shoulder, dismayed at Norbert's merriment at his expense.

In the center of the yard stood the venerable pump-house with its moss-grown roof. Cooing pigeons strutted up and down the slanting boards, and a pert and saucy flock of sparrows made themselves comfortable on the edge, watching for a favorable moment to pounce down upon the grain on which the chickens were feeding. A cherry-tree's drooping branches enveloped the worm-eaten structure with a ready-made mantle of pink fragrant blossoms.

Ruth turned back her sleeves and unclasped the heavy gold bracelet from her wrist, then held her pretty hands beneath the spout.

Norbert swung the handle of the pump up and down; his eyes were riveted upon the girl's rosy fingers, as they dabbled in the clear cool flow, to remove all traces of flour from the delicately tinted nails. Ruth felt his look. As he stooped again, she dashed the crystal drops over his head

“Jack Tar is not attending to his duty!” she cried, with the air of an admiral. “You have been so vigorously pumping away, that grandmother’s brand-new apron has got soaking wet.”

Norbert shook the drops from his hair, and replied, half gravely, half in jest: “And therefore I am degraded forthwith from a naval cadet to the ranks of a common sailor. Do you know, Baroness Altingen, that you have conferred upon me all in a breath the highest honor and the greatest humiliation? Which must I consider final?”

“What honor?” asked Ruth in amazement. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“The maidens of Malmö look upon water as a holy element,” explained Sängoulème with a gentle smile, “and consecrate with it everything they love. They dip it from the Saluö, and water their miraculous herbs with it; they place a bowl-full at the head of their dead, and sprinkle their bridal garments with the crystal drops. The girls of Malmö observe a singular custom—they dash drops of water over the head of their chosen one, and they meant to signify by this: ‘Come, woo me’!”

Erl Queen blushed to the roots of her golden

hair. She wiped her hands on her dainty lace handkerchief without giving the young man a glance. Her sensitive lips were curled with pride as on a certain night in the clover-dell, when she told Norbert with haughty mien: "I am the mistress of Altingen!"

"It is well that we are not living on the banks of the Saluö," she said after a pause. "Too bad that our maidens have lost all taste for such poetical folly! Ah, what beautiful cherry-blossoms!" ejaculated Ruth, changing the conversation abruptly. "What a good time we shall have of it, Hans, when they are ripe enough to be gathered!"

"Shall I gather a sprig for you, Baroness?" The young man raised his arm and drew down one of the bloom-cumbered branches, so that the pink flakes rained down on Ruth's brow.

"Heaven forbid!" resisted Erl Queen with mock alarm. "Who knows what such an act might signify among the Eskimos or the Zulus!" continued she with a forced smile. "You have aroused my distrust, M. de Sangoulème, and while I myself committed a *watery* breach of etiquette, I should not like to have it supplemented by a *flowery* allegory!"

She threw the apron over the low board fence

and disappeared, like a flash, behind the kitchen door.

"Coffee is ready, Norbert!" called Ännchen from the open window. With a smile on his lips the young seaman turned toward the house.

"She wears my cherry-blossoms all the same!" thought he deep down in his heart.





V.

NORBERT walked up the broad stone stair of Castle Altingen. The stone deer were still before the open door in majestic repose. The double coat-of-arms crowned the door-post as of old, and the chains of the draw-bridge rattled beneath the weight of Suwaroff's hoofs.

One of the windows of the tower was thrown open; the lace curtains trembled in the breeze; Mademoiselle Marion's hand was seen to move mechanically up and down from her embroidery-frame. Anna's fresh, lovely soprano fell in clear, fresh notes on Norbert's ear, singing :

“ Why should I wander away,
When Love is not by my side—
Love that will have its day,
And never will be denied?”

Norbert paused and listened to the song. Hassan came to greet him; the cadet's fingers passed caressingly over the dog's broad head.

He passed into the house and ascended the stairs. "And love is not by my side!" murmured he softly to himself. A sigh escaped his lips, as his eyes rested upon the proud antlers that adorned the spacious vestibule.

Norbert opened the old-fashioned double-doors of one of the rooms. Anna was there, and gave him a friendly nod; Mademoiselle Marion arose, greeted him with a cordial welcome and withdrew to order tea to be served.

Norbert sauntered across the room and pushed aside the damask-curtains that shrouded the entrance of the adjoining apartment. "Why so industrious, Fräulein Ruth?" asked he, as his eyes fell upon the mistress of Altingen, busily engaged upon a painting.

Ruth raised her head, drew a long breath and leaned back in her chair. She welcomed her guests with outstretched hand and a winning smile.

Norbert lingered before her easel and scanned the painting attentively.

"Do you know this lady?" asked he musingly. "What a strange face! One could hardly help dreaming of these eyes, if he looked long enough! She seems to be unmarried, for there is no ring

upon her finger. But what a singular idea for a woman to hold aloft a broken blade ! Hands like these were made to carry flowers, more befitting symbols !”

Ruth laid her brush aside. “I found the picture among a chest-ful of old documents. One side of the frame was a little scorched, as though by accidental fire. There was no trace of a signature; but on the back of it I found an inscription in Latin as singular as the picture itself !” Ruth raised it from the easel, and held it up to the young man.

“‘*Sic eunt fata hominum*’—‘Thus speed the lives of men’—” read Norbert, freely translating the words as he spoke. “This must have been written with reference to the broken blade. There must be some mysterious tale of love and strife connected with this pale fair countenance !”

“I have been searching a long time for a fitting pendant for my favorite knight, Sir Brecht-hald,” replied the girl vivaciously, “and none seemed better suited for that purpose than this noble lady. My room will be a very treasure-trove of curios, and mamma will be likely to shun it more than ever. Perhaps by the time you come back again I shall have unearthed a few more

relics. The Indian shell-horn and the panther-skin you gave me complete my present collection in a striking manner."

"When I come back again!" said Norbert wistfully; "just now I can think of nothing but the parting. I wish that 't was over, and I was once more rocking upon the friendly deep! I shall think very, very often of old Castle Altingen!"

"Must you return so soon then to your ship?" queried Ruth, regretfully. She gathered her brushes and walked to the open window. "It will be very lonely here without you; and, methinks, Ännchen and I will not be slow in fleeing to the capital!"

"Will you be glad to go?"

"Oh, yes. I am longing to attend my first ball, and eager to behold the glittering uniforms, and make the acquaintance of the members of the Ducal House, Princess Josephine above all, for my mother was her lady-in-waiting. How entertaining it will be to stand amidst a flood of light from thousands of gas-jets, robed in white satin, surrounded by a mob of fashionable people, who have drawn life's greater prizes from the will of destiny!"

Ruth had spoken lightly, carelessly; but before

Norbert's inward vision stood again the spoilt haughty child of the clover-dell. He imagined her proud eyes dwelling lingeringly on the splendors of her first court-ball, her lips smiling at the future that opened so brilliantly before her. And again he saw those little hands turning the waffle-iron in the humble kitchen of the hunting-lodge, and washing away the traces of her labor in the crystal flood that poured from the spout of the old pump. Ruth was an enigma to him : a natural, saucy, merry romp, and the obdurate, domineering Lady of Altingen ! The girlish friend of the for-ester's daughter, and the haughty, repelling aristocrat of the brilliant ball-room ! " How shall I find her the *next* time ! " thought Norbert with an inward groan. His temples throbbed feverishly ; he bent his head far out of the window, and plucked with nervous fingers at the roses that twined around the window-casing. For he loved her, loved the strange Erl Queen, with a deathless love.



VI.

“Erl Queen has done me harm !”

THEY strolled in silence through the moonlit park of Castle Altingen. Hassan and Ännchen were in pursuit of little Hans, who had forged his way ahead : “ Wait for us, you little sprite ! ” and they disappeared behind the bend in the lane.

Norbert paused in his walk and looked into Ruth’s eyes. “ For the last time to-night ! ” said he, and his handsome head dropped dejectedly on his breast.

“ How I envy you ! ” exclaimed the mistress of Altingen warmly. “ You are going far away to distant lands, among new people ! You will hear the storm-winds howl and exult in the wonders of the tropics ! I wish I could go with you ! ”

“ Oh, if you could ! ” cried the young man impetuously. “ Then I would joyfully sail to the other end of the earth ! Ruth, do you not *know*,

I love you ? Do you not know, Erl Queen, that you have stolen both my heart and soul ? That I have but one thought and one hope—to be near you, to possess you !” He sank upon his knees before her, and pressed her hands to his quivering lips. “Erl Queen, have pity on me ! Do not turn from me ! I would spill heart’s blood for one friendly word from your sweet lips !”

Ruth had recoiled from him. Her arms pressed heavily on the mossy pedestal at the end of the cypress walk, and she gazed stonily into Norbert’s excited face. The moon shone full upon it ; truth and honesty were reflected in every feature. But the eyes of the Lady of Altingen dropped down and lingered on the simple sailor-blouse, beneath which the heart of the lad was wildly throbbing. She thought of “Grandma Forester” and the “Governess,” of whom she had spoken so disdainfully in the clover-dell.

“Arise, Norbert !” said she icily. “I am at a loss to understand your conduct ! You cannot seriously mean to ask me, a girl scarcely sixteen years old, to promise myself to a man, whose future, to say the most, is only doubtful.” Ruth turned abruptly away and gathered the soft folds of her gown close around her.

Norbert had arisen. Every drop of blood had fled from his face. "Forgive me, if I have offended you!" said he hoarsely.

There was that in the tone of his voice which made Ruth's heart faint with anguish. She turned and held out her hand to him. "I have hurt you, have been forced to hurt you!" she whispered excitedly. "Why did you conjure up a scene that should never have taken place between us? Do not leave me in anger. Remain my friend, as you have always been; and above all, do not carry away with you unkindly feelings for Castle Altingen because of the disagreeable memory connected with your last night's stay here! It was not my fault, indeed it was not!" she pouted—again the obstinate child of the clover-dell.

Norbert did not touch her proffered hand. Upright and proud he stood before her. "The man without a future will never cross your path again, Baroness Altingen! Fear not that the sailor's jacket will cause your cheeks to blush, or that madame your mother shall be molested by a sight of it! I do not go from you in anger, but with the torturing knowledge that I have ill repaid your many kindnesses. I leave you in God's keeping, Fräulein Ruth. Farewell!"

The mistress of Altingen stood rooted to the spot. Her eyes followed Norbert's stately form as, with head erect, he walked away in the moonlight and disappeared behind the fragrant elder-bushes. Ruth pressed her hand to her palpitating heart, and watched him out of sight. For a moment it seemed as if she must hasten after him and bid him turn again, with wild regretful words. But, no ! A sullen look came into the girl's face and she shook her curls defiantly from her forehead. Her lips were tightly clenched and the little hand clutched the cold stone convulsively. "I am the mistress of Altingen !" Norbert would have read in every line in that pale proud face.

Without once turning back, the young seaman dashed away through the forest. Black shadows fell athwart his path ; the moon was hidden now in murky clouds, and the stillness of death was round about. Suddenly Norbert came to a halt, and pressed his hand firmly upon his panting breast. A storm of wild emotions swept through his brain ; unuttered sobs threatened to choke him. For the first time in his young life his heart bled from that deep wound, which the hand of Love inflicts so remorselessly ! Beyond yonder oak-trees was Castle Altingen, where lived the

woman who had spurned his honest loyal suit with chilling pride ! She dreams of the brilliant future that lies before her, and for the sake of the dazzling uniforms she looks with lofty scorn upon the sailor's jacket ! The modest cloth of blue without stars or stripes, beneath which a heart beats—that is the truest of all !

“The man without a future will let you hear from him, Erl Queen !” cried Norbert, with a groan. Echo lifted her drowsy head, and buried the brave words in the somber forest.





VII.

“’Tis the sad wind that sings through withering leaves !”

NEARLY all the trees were skeletons. Sere crumpled leaves were rustling over the pavements of the town. The chill November wind twisted and tumbled them about until his frosty breath grew tired of the sport, and he flew away to the shuddering pine-trees, in whose whispering aisles he pitched his tent. He left the withered leaves lying in heaps around the railings of the squares and the corners of the streets, and there they murmured plaintively, as hurried feet tramped over them, or mischievous children scattered them broad-cast in their noisy play. But now evening is drawing near, and rest will soon come for them. Deep shadows are creeping over the earth ; the aristocratic quarter near the park which surrounds the ducal palace is quiet and deserted. Here and there the light of a street-lamp penetrates the gloom, and paints fan-

tastic lines over the marble façades. Gilt-topped railings isolate the handsome villas from the outer world. Their quiet is rarely disturbed by the foot-fall of the pedestrian, and only the muffled tinkling of the door-bell trembles now and then through the thickly carpeted vestibules.

The villa "Olivia" was one of the grandest among many beautiful mansions. The walls were overlaid with elaborately-fashioned stucco. Tasteful garlands and arabesques surrounded the house, and columns of gleaming white marble supported the balconies in front. A lovely park completed this princely home.

Lights were flitting to and fro behind the richly-draped windows. The shadowy form of a valet appeared behind the glistening glass-panes; the blinds were slowly drawn, and window after window was shrouded in darkness.

From above the soft tones of a piano came floating. The swelling chords of the music, and a girl's richly-cultivated voice blended to sweet harmony.

In one of the coziest, most luxurious rooms sat a young lady, idly lounging in a comfortable easy-chair. Her head rested on the delicate palm of her hand as she listened breathlessly to the sweet

cadences that fell from the lips of the singer. It was Ruth of Altingen. At the piano sat a young man, giving a singing-lesson to the forester's rosy daughter. His head was thrown back as he accompanied her song, and his eyes lingered lovingly on Ännchen's little hand, which rested upon the instrument.

Herr Hessbach is a musical director of renown, and quite a genius. Besides this he is a most agreeable gentleman. The young girls of the town sing his ballads in public and at home ; his Nocturnes are favorite compositions. The short, bright poems which he sets to music are his own, and they are as strange and glowing as their author. They ring through many girlish heads, and fervent, innocent lips are often clandestinely pressed upon that part of the title-page where the name of " Hessbach " occurs.

Hessbach's countenance was frank and noble. The hair curled slightly on a forehead where genius had its throne. Fire and enthusiasm flashed from his eyes, which were large and black, like those of a southerner.

He was a thorough artist, a passionate improviser, whose originality men admired, but whose soul they could not fathom.

Opposite Ruth sat Fräulein Marion. She was busily sewing away on a dozen or more pink satin bows, and every once in a while she held a little sprig of apple-blossoms against the dainty ribbons. Nothing could dissuade her from putting with her own hands the finishing touches to the toilet of her young charge ; for Ruth of Altingen had been bidden for the evening to a family supper at the ducal castle.

“ Chérie ! ” beckoned Marion fondly, “ I want to see how well these look in your hair ! ” And suiting her action to the word, she leaned across the table to try the effect of ribbons and flowers in Ruth’s golden-brown hair.

Ruth implored her to desist. “ Leave me in peace, mademoiselle ! ” cried the girl. “ Afterwards you may do with me as you please, but spare me these perpetual trials now. Do you want to turn me into a fashion-plate ? ”

Mademoiselle Marion fell moodily back in her chair. “ I can’t understand how a young girl can be so indifferent about her appearance ! ” growled she. “ Of late even a pin seems to annoy you, Fräulein Ruth, and I am sure, if you had your own way, you would go to court in your morning-robe or your riding-habit ! Mon dieu, it is incompre-

hensible, how little interest you take in the gaieties of the season. Your passion for the capital seems to have perceptibly cooled down ; and this is only your second year ! ”

Ruth's eyes were slowly raised to the face of the speaker ; they flashed angrily, but her voice was calm and quiet, and an indefinable smile hovered around her sensitive mouth. “The past two years have shown me everything I care to see, perhaps even more. I know to satiety what city-life infers, and yearn for home !” Her head dropped back among the soft cushions. Erl Queen clasped her hands around her knees and sighed deeply.

Mademoiselle Marion straightened herself with all the dignity at her command, and laid away her work. She was about to begin one of her endless tirades about silly notions and childish caprices, when the portière was pushed aside noiselessly, and a valet entered, carrying a silver tray in his hand. On it was a card, which he presented to his mistress.

Ruth looked at it furtively ; a cloud spread over her face as she turned abruptly away. “In the balcony room, I will come presently,” said the Lady of Altingen coldly.

The card contained the following high-sounding inscription : " Alice de Nievendloh von Hollingen, Lady-in-waiting to Her Ducal Highness the Princess Josephine."

" Who is it ? " exclaimed Mademoiselle Marion, bounding from her seat. " Not the Countess, I hope ; it is only six o'clock ! " She snatched the card and examined it coldly through her eyeglass. " Ah, Alice," she nodded, and the expression of her face changed as if by magic. " The sweet child ! Her attachment for you, Ruth, is positively touching ! You owe the dear creature at least two calls, and yet she comes for the third time with unvarying amiability ! "

" And will be likely to come as often again ! " said Ruth ironically, with a quick glance at Marion's ecstatic countenance. " You call it touching, it strikes me as rather persistent ! No human being could have shown her more plainly than I, that her presence is not agreeable to me ; but the subtle Lady-in-waiting takes no notice of my gentle hints."

Before Mademoiselle Marion had time to reply, the velvet folds of the portière had closed behind Ruth. The Frenchwoman folded her hands over her breast with penitent mien, and begged Herr

Hessback's pardon for the interruption caused by the brief dispute. Then she swept from the room and across the hall to her own apartment, whence she emerged no more that night.

In the meantime Ruth had gone to the reception-room. This was a handsome, spacious apartment. A dim light from two gas-lamps streamed from the ceiling, and painted grotesque shadows over the violet-colored cushions and the furniture. The gilded backs of the chairs gleamed fantastically in the drowsy twilight, and the marble statues on their elaborate pedestals cast long lines across the brightly waxed floor. Delicate, filmy laces behind heavy satin folds swung from the tall windows and balcony doors. They were confined by handsome tassels to the claws of bronze eagles. The walls were hung with portraits of the various members of the ducal family. A fresh laurel-wreath adorned the frame of the reigning Prince, while dismal bands of crape fell from the knob on which the picture of the Dowager-Duchess was hung, whose death had not long since occurred.

Ruth had entered noiselessly, and stood before Alice de Nievendloh.

"At last, dear Ruth!" exclaimed the visitor

reproachfully. "How can you be so cruel as to leave me so long alone in this dismal room! I trembled like a child under the icy stare of the old Duchess yonder. She looked exactly like that upon her bed of state, when Countess Sternow and myself kept the guard of honor!"

The pretty court-lady shrugged her shoulders with a shudder, as she thought of that gloomy vigil, and sank back into the soft cushions, from which she had emerged at Ruth's entrance.

Fräulein Alice appeared to be past thirty; her features could still lay claim to beauty, although they were more piquant than lovely. But her good-looks were evidently on the wane. A sharp line was drawn around her thin lips; her eyebrows gave evidence of the clever use of the brush, and powder and rouge seemed no strangers to the toilet-table of the young lady. But underneath the white veil she looked decidedly charming, and Ruth's memory carried her back for a moment to her first meeting with Alice, when that individual's luminous eyes and pert, saucy nose seemed beautiful to the unsophisticated Lady of Altingen.

"Forgive me, Alice; I forgot that unpleasant surroundings make minutes out of seconds!"

said Ruth with chill politeness. "I will endeavor to remember your aversion to the balcony-room, and hereafter have you conducted to my own apartments!"

"Hereafter? Not until you come and visit me, you little malaprop!" chided Alice, shaking her finger menacingly at the mistress of Altingen. She drew Ruth gently down beside her, and placed her arm caressingly around the girl's shoulders.

"You are a little trickster, dear Ruth, who exacts the same assiduous attention from us girls, that you do from our unfortunate cavaliers, who sit pining at your feet. *Eh bien*, I begrudge you not a single one, but on this particular evening I envy you!"

Ruth looked wonderingly at her. "Why on this evening?" she queried.

Alice drew herself up and gave her muff a vigorous shake. "You are the only fortunate one among all the ladies who are admitted to court-circles, who is invited to the first family reunion in honor of Prince Leopold!" she exclaimed gaspingly. "Few others enjoy the patronage of the chief lady-of-the-household, and yours was a fortunate fate indeed, that made your father the life-long friend of the Countess Lersneck. A

hundred obstacles would be thrown in your way, were it not for these high connections——”

“Which one, for instance?” smiled Ruth curiously.

“Allons, mon Dieu, how should I know?” said Fräulein von Nievendloh, with an eloquent shrug of her pretty shoulders; “with the Grand-mistress-of-the-chase, for example, you are entirely ‘out.’ It was not very politic, dear Ruth . . .”

“To decline once for all her pious tracts and invitations to Bible-lessons and various other edifying functions?” broke in Ruth with a half-sarcastic, half-amused smile. “No, Alice, I have no talent for sitting among those little dirty urchins to pick up the stitches they happen to drop. I would rather take my chances of perdition, if the way to salvation is paved with knitting-classes and Bible-lessons, according to the doctrines of the Grand-mistress-of-the-chase.”

Alice turned up her dainty nose.

“Aside from all that,” retorted she, with chill reserve, “you would do well to at least refrain from opposing too openly a religious movement, which the *bon ton* countenances. The cream of our society follows the new college-preacher, whose orthodox views have won for him the

fullest sympathy of our aristocratic circles. It is considered 'good form' to attend his church, and all who desire to maintain themselves, or to venture to enter our coterie, follow his lead! You, dear Ruth, oppose this custom strenuously, and it is mere obstinacy on your part that you go instead to that liberal, uncouth Councillor of the Consistory, whose irreligious ways have drawn down upon him the disfavor of the Grand-mistress-of-the-chase."

"I cannot judge his ways, for I know nothing of them, but his sermons are clever and original, frank and open, and are much more suited to my taste than the carefully cut and dried effusions of the college-preacher, who simply panders to the aristocracy. But enough of this; let everybody go to Heaven after his or her own fashion! Anything new in town?" Ruth folded her hands, and looked questioningly at Alice.

Words of reproof were on the lips of the Nievend-loh; but she bethought herself, and accepted the turn in the conversation.

"News? *En masse!*" she exclaimed vivaciously. "First of all, our handsome, adorable Lieutenant Otthardt is forced to resign from the army on account of his many debts! He tried hard to rehabilitate himself by a wealthy marriage, the same as

his worthy sire, who offered his gilt crown to the daughter of a wealthy manufacturer. But the gallant Lieutenant calculated without his host. The 'coupons' did not take kindly to the idea of curing his consumptive pocket-book!" Alice laughed convulsively. "I am glad with all my heart—the frivolous fellow!" she continued, her eyes flashing unspeakable hatred. "I shouted with joy when I heard the news!"

"Impossible!" said Ruth quietly, and with subtle irony. "During all last winter you and he seemed very intimate, and poor Otthardt was your devoted cavalier."

"It was nothing but a caprice, an idle game!" And Alice lifted her shoulders still a little higher, and threw her muff vehemently on the table. "I never cared a straw for him! *Mon Dieu*, why should I?—I have no money!" she added with stinging emphasis. "And what is to become of the love of a Lieutenant, unless it is kept aflame with bags of ducats? Do you know, Ruth, what I believe?" Alice drew herself up to her full height, and caught Ruth's hand in an iron grasp, while her black eyes snapped fire and seemed to devour the face of the young girl. "I believe that he will try his luck with *you*. Fortune has

showered all her gifts into your lap ! You are a wealthy heiress, and our young gentlemen are eager to contend for the hand of the mistress of Altingen. Not one of them will dare to play with you ! You will never be cast aside like a broken toy that has lost its value, for you have money, Ruth, and are a most desirable match ! Do not let them misuse you ! Do not sacrifice yourself to the miserable frivolity of a man who deserves to be punished by God and men ! Ruth, I beseech you by all that is sacred to you, do not come to the rescue of Otthardt. Promise me, I implore you !” Alice pressed the hands of the young girl with a wild, passionate gesture ; her lips were close to Ruth’s ear ; her eyes flashed uncannily through the white lace, and the laugh which rang through the room was shrill and rasping. “He deserves no pity ! Let him perish with all those whom Nemesis out-runs ! Yes, go to America, my handsome Sir Otthardt ; I have prayed Heaven for it !” A deep breath hissed from the breast of the passionate woman before she released Ruth’s slender hand.

The young girl recoiled from her. She cast a look of terror at the speaker’s malignant features.

“If marriage is the only remedy by which Lieu-

tenant von Otthardt can be helped, I am very sorry that I cannot give his fate a friendly turn ; as I am not yet of age, I cannot even lend him a sum of money."

Alice composed herself. "It would be but a drop on a red-hot stone !" said she, with a forced smile. "He is totally ruined ; the straw that broke the camel's back was the last bazaar ; with mad persistence he bought every engraving which the handsome Baroness Zirska had for sale in her booth . . . By the way, I have more news in store for you ! Guess what pleasure awaits you this evening ?"

"I hope it will not prove an invitation from the 'Mistress-of-the-chase.' Aside from that I am ready for anything !"

"No. For the balance of this month, at least, we are safe. You will have the pleasure of making a new acquaintance, you fortunate child ! Oh, Ruth, how I envy you this night !"

"Prince Leopold ?" queried Erl Queen, looking musingly at the speaker. "I hope he will prove an interesting talker, and relate his adventures at sea ; I am told he has been away for more than two years."

"Yes, two years !" corroborated Alice. "He

announced no one but himself, and nobody dreamed that he would bring a guest with him. This morning, just two hours before his arrival, he telegraphed that he would come accompanied by a friend. I saw them arrive from my window, chérie. My very ideal of a man ! The Prince looks like a sixteen-year old school-boy beside him ! Tall, proud, of kingly presence, very grave, melancholy almost, and therefore doubly interesting ! I sent my maid at once to learn his name, and in some way the clever creature contrived to capture one of his cards !” Alice fumbled hurriedly in her pocket. “The Prince is very intimate with him. Here it is—read. What a charming name !”

Ruth lifted her hand indifferently, and cast a furtive look at the card, which Alice held up before her eyes. A wave of alarm spread over the delicate face of the young girl ; she felt faint at heart, and the blood surged madly to her temples.

“‘De Sangoulème, Lieutenant in the Navy,’” read she. The mistress of Altingen lifted her head ; her features resumed their wonted repose, and she returned the card to Alice without a quiver of her eyelids : “A pretty name, indeed ! Thank you, Alice !”

Fräulein von Nievendloh pressed the card ecstatically to her breast. "The grandest name, and the most worthy bearer!" cried she exultingly. "I really believe, Ruth, that I am already madly smitten with the interesting tar. In three days more my unsophisticated heart will have surrendered unconditionally! The young man may congratulate himself to the possession of Prince Leopold's friendship; it means the admiralty patent in his pocket even now. His career, I predict, will be rapid and distinguished. In a few more years from now the name of 'Captain de Sangoulème' will grace the paste-board. I am burning with anxiety to meet this favorite of fortune; and am indignant at myself, for having cheated myself out of this evening's joy."

"I intended to ask you, a moment ago, why you will not be one of the party, Alice?" asked Ruth absently. Her head was firmly pressed against the cushion of her chair, and her eyes were gazing into space. "I hope the Princess will not be compelled to miss the first meeting with her favorite nephew."

Fräulein von Nievendloh shrugged her shoulders. "Of course, not: for strange to say, this time her spasms passed away more rapidly than

ever before. Formerly she has lain for days in the most dreadful condition ; all her attendants are made miserable by it."

"Poor, unfortunate lady !" exclaimed Baroness Ruth, with genuine compassion. "I am very fond of Her Highness, and revere the old lady infinitely. I should have regretted it for her sake, if she had been deprived of the pleasure of this meeting. How fortunate you are, Alice, to be privileged to serve so noble and august a lady !"

"That depends," smiled the Nievendloh; "there are times when I would gladly abdicate in your favor. The Princess is an antiquated personage," she continued, with chilling indifference, "who spends day in, day out, among her ivy-vines and her seared and faded reminiscences. It is asking too much of a young girl of my temperament to keep her company in this retired life. Thank Heaven, Her Highness has some compassion for her imprisoned bird, and opens the cage now and then. I tremble with envy when I think of the delightful existence the Sternows lead in the service of the young Duchess ! It is a perfect round of gaieties from morning until night ; carriages come rolling back and forth streams of light flood the left wing of the castle, and entertainment follows entertain-

ment, while I am forced to sit like a recluse by the old-fashioned couch of the Princess, to read to her the dullest, driest of existing novels !”

Fräulein Alice stamped her little foot irascibly on the shining floor. A vicious expression flitted for a moment over her face and made it look ugly and faded.

Ruth felt indignant at this uncompromising effusion on the part of the Nievendloh, and the feverish desire she exhibited for pleasure and gaiety was repulsive to the young girl.

Fräulein von Nievendloh arose to go. “Ah. that’s the little sentimental wood-nymph I hear singing yonder !” exclaimed she sarcastically, pointing with her muff in the direction from which the singing came. “A passably fair voice ! Is she going on the stage ?”

“No, thank Heaven, it is not necessary that my friend should take such a step.” Ruth stood before the little Lady-in-waiting with flashing eyes.

“Another one of your freaks, dear Ruth, with which you excite comment !” interposed Alice with haughty mien. “The daughter of your game-keeper, with no family to boast of, and very poor manners, so Mademoiselle Marion informs me.

What do you mean, dear child, by keeping such company?"

"To become more intimately allied with you by doing so, should M. de Sangoulème succeed in winning your coy heart!" The words dropped with biting sarcasm from the lips of the mistress of Altingen. "The sentimental game-keeper's daughter and the princely *protégé* are cousins!"

"Ruth!" cried Alice, as if electrified, and clutched the speaker's arm, "are you beside yourself? Sangoulème's cousin?"

"Anna's father and the mother of the young seaman were brother and sister!" replied Ruth, brushing the Nievendloh's hand coldly from her arm.

"Impossible! How can this be?" A moment ago Alice's face was deathly pale, now a vivid red spread over it. "He is the bearer of an old, aristocratic French name," she gasped.

"His mother was a German governess in France, and married the heir and oldest brother of her young charges against the wishes of the family." Ruth glanced at her *vis-à-vis* with cool indifference. Her voice was full of quiet irony. Alice bit her lips for a moment in painful embarrassment; then, turning the whole affair into

a jest, she laughed immoderately. "Of course there must be just such situations as you describe, Ruth, otherwise the rough material for romances would give out! The handsome cousin atones for it all, and the little 'wood-nymph' has risen in my estimation. I haven't time just now, but when we meet next you must introduce me to your 'Ännchen'! But what a hypocrite you are, Ruth; a hypocrite *comme il faut*! For more than a half hour you have seen me in raptures over the new Adonis; and at the close of my visit, and by mere chance even then, you mention these interesting details about his family. I am inclined to give you a good scolding, and will do so at the first opportunity. But now, adieu, dearest; my attendant will be beside himself with impatience! Don't forget about Otthardt—*vous comprenez? Apropos!*" Alice came back a step and placed her hand familiarly on the young girl's shoulder. "I am half inclined to believe the poor fellow will have the impudence to apply to the Princess Josephine for aid. He may wave the 'banner of souvenirs' if all other ropes fail, and rely upon the sentimentality of Her Highness! But I will spoil his little game there, by doing all in my power to prevent his obtaining

an audience with her. It would kill me to know that she should be weak enough to lend him a sum of money."

"The Princess?" questioned Ruth incredulously. "Why should he appeal to the old lady, who devotes the larger share of her income to charitable purposes, as is well known, and is, besides, the least wealthy among the members of the ducal house! It seems to me more likely that he would go to the Duke in his extremity, if the latter does not of his own accord come to the rescue of his former adjutant. *On dit*, that the Duke has a warm liking for the handsome, gallant officer."

Alice smiled—it was an ugly smile. "He *had*, little Ruth, no doubt of that! But since I have taken the trouble to open the eyes of His Highness, his goodwill has been much reduced. The *enfant gâté* of the ladies need hope for nothing from that quarter. No; the last star of hope in Otthardt's sky is the Princess, and even before this luminary a little cloud will sail in the person of a certain Lady-in-waiting, who was set aside as a worthless toy to die of a broken heart for the sake of a caprice, if so she felt disposed! Ruth, do you know, revenge is sweet?" Fräulein von

Nievendloh looked steadfastly at the young girl and shook her head defiantly.

"*Bêtise!*" she continued after a pause, "you are a good child, who have been taught the love of mankind as it is preached from the pulpit of your village-church ! Intrigue and hatred do not know the way to your quiet castle in the woods ! At Altingen everybody loves everybody else, and the dog drinks with the cat from a single dish in blissful harmony. Am I not right ?" Alice laughed aloud. "You ask why Otthardt should appeal to the Princess ? Are you not familiar with the court-chronicle, little Miss Prudence, that you ask about things which the sparrows have twittered from the house-tops these twenty years and more ? Have you never heard of the sensational story connected with the younger days of the Princess ?"

"No," cried Ruth. "What was it ? Oh, Alice, please tell me ?"

"What ? Have you been at the court these past two years, and are not yet acquainted with the most exciting chapter in the ducal annals ? Either you haven't a shadow of curiosity, or wicked tongues have for once forgot their prating. That which coupled the name of Otthardt with

Josephine's was a little attachment, a fragment of poetry which some call touching, others nauseous. I side with the latter, for I have no desire to add a thread to the veil of glory sympathetic souls have woven around the head of the old spinster. In short, Otthardt's father was Chamberlain at the court of the old Duke Ernst, as handsome and audacious as his son, and just as much in debt. Princess Josephine was never pretty, not even particularly clever or piquant, but she was one of those ethereal beings that are always sentimental. Ere long it became town-talk, that the young Chamberlain enjoyed the preference of the Princess; the Lady-of-the-household was an eye-witness to a scene in the winter-garden that took place between them, and confirmed the rumor. The lovers had believed themselves alone, and Josephine took a rose from her corsage, kissed it, and gave it to the handsome Chamberlain with a look that betrayed her secret. Her ladyship had always borne a grudge against the Otthardts, and strove to ruin the young man, by telling the Duke what had been thus discovered. Before the evening was over His Highness was aware of the love of his daughter, and the audacity of the Baron. The Duke was a callous, despotic old

man, very irascible, and pitiless when angry. The information came with all the more force, as only a short time ago some reigning prince had opened negotiations for the hand of Josephine. Strange as it may seem, the Duke's resentment was directed only against his daughter ; while Otthardt continued to enjoy his favor to the great chagrin of his accuser. Stormy scenes took place between father and child ; the gentle, demure Josephine developed into an impetuous, passionate woman, who vowed that she would either marry Otthardt, or remain single all her life. This declaration on her part prompted the Duke to action, and an intrigue was set afoot, that proved by its outcome the correctness of the general estimation in which the Baron was held. To the Countess Leubwitz was intrusted the delicate mission of announcing to Baron Otthardt, that the Duke would pay the debts of his Chamberlain, provided the latter was willing to publish his engagement with a young society lady within a fortnight. Otthardt was prudent and calculating.. The affection of the Princess had added a pleasant spice to his career at court ; but in time it promised to prove troublesome, for it clashed with the views of the Duke, and would bring loss and public disfavor in its

wake. His debts had accumulated from year to year; his path was perilous, unless the generous hand of the Duke removed the millstone from his neck. It did not take him long to decide. The Countess left the presence of the Baron with a *corplaisant* smile on her flabby countenance, and carried to her ducal master the most touching and humble assurances of the obedience of his Chamberlain. Four days later printed notices flooded the city: Baron Otthardt announced his engagement to Fräulein Marianna von H, the half-deaf heiress of the most celebrated gun-manufacturer in the duchy.

“ ‘Well done!’ applauded the public maliciously; and the intriguers at court nodded to each other and rubbed their hands: ‘One is out of the way, now for the wedding at the castle!’ But they had reckoned without their host. In the right wing of the castle laid Princess Josephine, writhing in agony, a victim of the first attack of epilepsy, with which she has been afflicted ever since. Her recovery was very doubtful at first, and extremely slow; the name of Otthardt was not allowed to be mentioned in her presence, and she has never once again been in the winter-garden. The princely suitor arrived,

and had a long interview with the Duke ; but he departed two days later, never to return, and the 'Lady-of-the-household' wore her wedding-robe, prepared long in advance of the contemplated marriage, at the carnival-ball, to keep the gorgeous stuff from growing motheaten. The Princess retired to her own wing in the castle, and no one was admitted but the Countess Saaleck-Hardenberg, your mother, Ruth, and Prince George, the father of the present Duke. She has never since entered a ball-room, and her dislike of any kind of amusement is so pronounced, that she makes a nun almost of me. But, *merci mille fois*. My motto is : 'To-morrow let's be gay again !' This is the story, dearest Ruth. But while I have been gossiping, it has grown late. Hasten, little one, and dress. Let me have a peep at your finery just for a moment !" She took Ruth by the arm and dragged the mistress of Ältingen away with her.

In the mean time Herr Hessbach had folded up his music-sheets. He paused before Ännchen and held out his hand.

"Farewell, Fräulein Anna ! Be sure and practice the new Aria ; I shall be back in a month, and my first visit will be to the villa Olivia !"

Ännchen looked blandly at him with clear, trustful eyes. "I'll hold my thumb for you, that the new opera may prove a success!" said she merrily, holding her little hand aloft in the attitude described. "I am very anxious to see the criticisms, and for their sake will even read the newspapers. Don't you think this heroism on my part?"

He smiled. "I can appreciate your sacrifice, for I am aware of your contempt of printer's ink. Are you not fond of reading novels, Fräulein Anna?"

Ännchen made a wry face. "Oh, yes, when they end happily, and do not make one weep. I am a very silly child, Herr Hessbach, to look at the last page first, and if nothing is said of an engagement or a wedding, I throw the book aside. On the whole I read very little, a magazine now and then—and—poetry; I love poetry!" She looked at him wistfully; the lamp-light was reflected on her golden hair.

"You seem to take an interest only in the bright side of life," replied Herr Hessbach playfully, "and sympathize with other people's joys. Do you know that this surprises me?"

"Indeed? Why should it?" asked the forester's daughter.

“Because you do not seem aware of the depth of your heart, Fräulein Anna,” he said more gravely than he had intended. “You sing the songs I have taught you very correctly and prettily, but you do not throw your soul into the music, and I wish more than I can tell, that you should sing an Aria like this, for example”—he pointed to the sheets on the piano—“with more profound and touching sentiment! Perhaps the time will come, and until then, farewell; do not forget me!” He caught her hand between his own, and gazed long and warmly into her eyes. Before the child had time to frame an answer he had disappeared behind the velvet portière.

Anna stood rooted to the spot with folded hands and down-cast eyes. Hessbach’s dark, glowing orbs were before her with their wonderful eloquence, never before had she deemed them so beautiful—or was it that they had never before looked at her as they did to-day? His hand had closed upon hers, and he had cried: “Do not forget me!”

The young girl pressed her hand to her breast, and a lovely carmine flooded her cheeks. “No, never!” whispered a voice in her heart. Half in a dream she walked to the piano and sat down

before the instrument. "It is this particular air that he wants me to sing with more vivid sentiment ! How strange, that it never occurred to me before, that I myself am the one from whose heart these words must spring !" Ännchen turned the sheets of music, her fingers passed lovingly over the keys, two dark eyes flashed before her, and close to her ear a voice said caressingly : "Do not forget me !" The girl drew a deep breath and broke out into a joyous strain :

"Oh, wondrous vision passing o'er me,
Art thou the golden dream of love !"

If Herr Hessbach could have heard his little pupil *then*, he would have vainly sought a better prima donna for his new opera.





VIII.

“My mother shall grace thee with garments of gold !”

THE beautifully upholstered boudoir of the young Duchess was situated in the left wing of the castle, next to “the Generals’ room,” a small, gallery-like apartment, so called from the life-sized portraits of famous warriors with which the walls were hung. The room of the Duchess was a veritable treasure-house filled with works of art, a breath of maiden poetry refining all. Underneath a group of fragrant hot-house plants sat in a light-blue satin wrapper the Princess Josephine. On a low stool at her feet crouched the mistress of Altingen, and prattled of her dear old forest-castle. The invalid’s gentle eyes hung spell-bound on Erl Queen’s charming person ; she raised her frail, wax-like hand, and passed it caressingly over the golden-brown hair of the young girl. “How glad I should be to breathe some

day the refreshing forest-air of castle Altingen ! ” smiled she sadly.

Ruth was attired in a beautiful cashmere gown of delicate pink, bordered elaborately with a garniture of deeper shade. A sprig of apple-blossoms nestled in her hair and at her breast.

“ Altingen would never welcome a more cherished guest ! ” cried she, with shining eyes ; and pressed her fresh sweet lips to the hand of the Princess.

“ I am sure, the quiet peaceful spot would awaken your deepest sympathies ! There is no strife nor tattle there, as in the sultry atmosphere of court ! Baseness and intrigue are unknown, and men do not kneel there before the image of the Crucified to invoke the wrath of Heaven on their neighbor’s house. Faces are not genuine here, Your Highness ; they smile and study meanwhile how they can best harm you ! I never knew before that it was politic to seem pious, and never met any one at Altingen who went to Bible-classes and church-festivals, and assured me afterwards with burning eyes that ‘ revenge was sweet. ’ ”

Josephine smiled ; but around her lips hovered a strange, bitter expression. “ My little Ruth is very keen in her censures, I fear ! What has

caused our poor residence to meet with such great disfavor in your eyes? Have wicked tongues been meddling with you, and expected the curious little Altingen girl to conform to the austere dictates of public opinion?"

For a moment Erl Queen looked irresolutely into the questioner's gentle eyes, then she shook her head energetically and folded her hands in her lap.

"No, Your Highness, nobody has meddled with me, nor am I slow to defend myself. But I am daily forced to see how hard and pitilessly others are assailed. The wicked intrigues that have caused the ruin of poor Lieutenant Otthardt, for example, are enough to frighten one," added she slowly, watching narrowly the countenance of Josephine. "I believe that he could still be rescued, but for the spite and enmity of his former friends, who have cut off every avenue of escape."

"Otthardt?" repeated the Princess with a sudden start. Her face was deathly pale. "Which Otthardt, my dear child?"

"The former Adjutant of His Highness, First Lieutenant in the Regiment of Uhlans," replied Ruth, not without considerable trepidation.

The evident excitement of her august friend

caused her to repent almost of her plan to frustrate the base designs of the Nievendloh. But she was firmly resolved to espouse the cause of the unfortunate Lieutenant.

The Princess raised her hand, and drew down an oleander-twig, in the full-blown flowers of which she buried her face. "A son of the dead Chamberlain?" asked she in a changed and quivering voice. "You speak of his ruin, Ruth, what do you mean? Speak, speak!"

The pink flowers rained down into her lap, as Princess Josephine released the branch and looked steadfastly at the young girl. A soft blush crept over the aged countenance.

"I call it ruin, when there is nothing left for an officer in the army to do but to emigrate to America, and earn his bread by the sweat of his brow. Among a hundred one perhaps returns, who has realized the ideal of his dreams in the 'new world.'"

"Good Heavens! What circumstances can be strong enough to drive him to America?" whispered the Princess.

The mistress of Altingen looked confidently at her. "He has contracted debts, which no one is willing to cancel, and as they are nearly all

debts of honor, incurred at the gaming-table, he is forced to doff the soldier's coat and bid his native land farewell forever. I feel sorry for him, since I feel sure his good and noble qualities outweigh his frivolity, for which a life of luxury at the capital is responsible, and the demands made upon him by an expensive regiment ! ”

The Princess lifted her fan to her lips.

“ Did not his mother leave him quite a fortune ? ” asked she. “ If I remember truly, Frau Marianna was heiress to a large estate.”

“ Which was heavily mortgaged and declared insolvent eight years ago, Your Highness. Nothing but a small competency was left.”

“ Good heavens ! ” Princess Josephine folded her hands ; her withered countenance looked strangely gloomy. “ I have never heard a word of this, but I am told that the young Lieutenant bears a great resemblance to his father. His complexion is dark ? ”

“ Yes, Your Highness ; and he is tall and strong, with fine, regular features and famously handsome eyes,” added Ruth vivaciously. “ He is considered the handsomest officer in garrison.”

The Princess smiled softly. “ Has my little Ruth looked deeper than she should into their

fascinating depths, and danced more than her share of waltzes with the gallant Uhlan?" said the Princess, lightly. "You seem to take a surpassing interest in the affairs of the young Baron!"

"Because, Your Highness, I pity him from the bottom of my heart. If it were in my power to help him I would gladly do so at once, for there is not much time to lose."

The portière that draped the entrance to the apartment in which Princess Josephine was sitting was parted, and in the door-way appeared the stalwart form of Prince Leopold, balancing himself on his heels, and talking over his shoulder to some-one in the next room.

The Princess bent quickly toward Ruth, and covered her face with her fan. "Come to tea to-morrow, dear Fräulein Ruth," she whispered with a swift glance at the noble seaman. "This is not the best place for talking over this affair, and I desire you to give me all the details. Come about seven; we shall be alone and undisturbed, and—you will keep silence, Ruth, I count upon you!" added she.

"Your Highness may rest assured of that!" nodded Erl Queen with a radiant smile. "I will come at the right hour to-morrow evening!"

The long talk of the lady of Altingen had exhausted the invalid's strength. She fell back heavily among the cushions, and her hands played nervously with the ivy-vines by her side.

"Are you anticipating much pleasure from the next court-ball, Fräulein Ruth?" asked the Princess composedly. "It will be a brilliant affair, more so than usual—in honor of my nephew Leopold!"

There was no time for Ruth to reply, for the young Prince advanced quickly upon them. His quick, searching eyes glanced from one to the other.

"Is it here I find you at last in this out-of-the-way little cabin!" exclaimed he. "George and my gracious sister-in-law have captured Sangoulème, and are quizzing him about my desperate deeds. Old Countess Lersneck has been pressing me hard about the romance of a sailor's life; Countess Sternow is still making tea, and every time I come near her she cries at the top of her voice: 'Good gracious, Your Highness, you are certain to upset the cream!'" And the Prince imitated, with a comical air, the high pitch of the young lady's voice. "And finally your Chamberlain, de Meisenbach! You don't expect me to

converse with that stuffed monkey ; do you ? ” the Prince laughed merrily. “ Auntie, he always looks to me like a marionette, whose duty it is to polish our wax-floors with his nose. Don’t his terrific bows amuse you also, Baroness Altingen ? ”

Ruth laughed gaily ; but the Princess Josephine shook her head disapprovingly, and caught in her own the hand of the young man.

“ You have changed but little, Leopold, during your two years of absence. The same pert lad, who speaks his new opinions much too freely ! Meisenbach *is* a comical individual at times, but he is an honest friend, and devoted to our house, particularly to your brother George. You should not forget this, my son ! ”

“ You dear, delightful auntie, you talk as seriously as if you thought what you are preaching ! ” laughed Leopold, and wound his arm tenderly around the old lady’s neck. “ Don’t you agree with me that the best of all is that I came back unchanged, the same old scamp, whose daring deeds you have so often deplored. The trains of the ladies’ dresses were never safe from my mischievous heels, Fräulein von Altingen, and I drew many a little demon on the swallow-tails of our gentlemen with a piece of chalk that I

always carried in my pocket. But all that can't be helped, and I am *just as I am!*"

The Princess smiled. "I thought you had come to fetch us to tea, my boy? What is the prospect, Leopold?"

"Slender!" sighed His Highness. "The sandwiches are slim enough for daylight to shine through, and there is a pot of tea no higher than my hand for all of us! It can't hold more than a quart! I used to drink half a kettle full myself on board-ship. Pretty poor rations, these, for one that is used to chunks of bread three inches thick! Auntie, there is no living with you any more. First you ignore me, and then you starve me to death!"

"Too bad, my lad, to be so shamefully treated!" smiled the Princess, amused, and measuring his manly stalwart form with tender pride. "I will see that the baker sends his largest loaves during your stay, and for this evening I will have a whole *pumpernickel* placed by your plate. And now let me have your arm, my dear. You've grown half a head taller in the last two years; formerly I could look over your shoulder, but now I have to raise my face to yours!"

Leopold caught the frail figure tenderly in his

arms. "Yes, dear aunt, these arms have grown sufficiently stout, but when it comes to serving you they are endued with a giant's strength. One of our ducal ancestors on my mother's side carried in his coat-of-arms the emblem of a bear with the motto: 'Strength is liberty.' I carry no such emblem, but his motto I have chosen for my own, and when people say of me that I am rough and uncouth like a bear, the curled, scented courtiers shrug their shoulders compassionately and whisper: 'Yes, a pity it is so!' But when the bear pounces down upon this tribe of fawning, cringing hirelings, they sing a hallelujah to his strength—while the good people of the land clap their hands and shout: 'Thank God, he *is* a bear!'"

He laughed and raised Josephine's hand to his lips. "And now let's be off! I hear the tea-cups rattling, and while I have been entertaining you Sangoulème must have run out of material long ago, for there is not much to tell about me. Your nephew has become a desperately dry and uninteresting individual, auntie, since his removal from the fertile field of our good residence. Please, Baroness Altingen, follow in our wake!" He bowed profoundly and held the portière aloft

They passed through the adjoining room and into the salon of the Duchess, where tea was being served.

Prince Leopold was a rather original specimen of mankind. He was tall and strong, the picture of perfect health and youthful vigor. He had been away at sea for two years as a lieutenant in the navy, and had refused persistently to outstrip his comrades by a more rapid promotion. His countenance was fresh and florid; a soft mustache was beginning to curl on his upper lip; in color it was like his hair, which was fair and fell in heavy masses around a broad, intellectual forehead. Beneath his bushy eye-brows twinkled a pair of merry blue eyes. He had one peculiar mania, which was to rebel against all ceremony and all restraint. Woe to the unfortunate victim, whose exaggerated behavior or ponderous etiquette aroused the ready-wit of the sailor Prince, and made him for all times to come the target for his sarcasms.

To the Princess Josephine he was attached with almost passionate tenderness. For years she had been a mother to the early-orphaned child. At court the Prince had almost as many enemies as he had friends, but the former covered their tracks

with the cloak of cringing devotion, and hid their sharp claws in the velveteen of flattery. It would have been unpardonably foolish to forfeit the favor of the future sovereign. According to human calculations Prince Leopold was the heir-apparent of his much older brother George. The latter had been married for a number of years, and so far only one little daughter had been born to the princely couple. Prince Leopold was therefore the next in line. To the young man himself this circumstance was rather an unwelcome obstacle to his desire for leading a free and roving life ; but it forced the creatures of his brother's court to don the mask of prudence, behind which spite and envy laid their idle plans.

Tea was served in the salon of the Duchess ; the company was still assembled around the table, which sparkled with silver and handsome cut glass. A lamp with three large globes shed a soft light over the luxurious space. A bright wood fire sparkled in the fire-place ; on the piano flashed three candelabras, that harmonized in shape and color with those which projected from every corner of the satin-draped walls.

The Duchess was engaged upon some needlework ; her pretty fingers pulled the silk threads

leisurely through the fine weft. Fräulein von Sanden was modelling a wax flower, stopping now and then in her work to submit it to the Princess for inspection. The latter praised the deftness of her Lady-in-waiting, with charming amiability.

Sangoulème conversed almost exclusively with the Duke ; he answered the occasional questions of the ladies politely, but never addressed himself directly to the Baroness von Altingen.

He had been introduced to Ruth, and bowed profoundly with a measured air before her, without noting that the cheeks of the young girl had grown deathly pale. Ruth did not address him, and he turned to one of the by-standers, only to ask a dozen indifferent questions. "She did not speak to me—she does not want to know me!" said Norbert to himself, and a feeling of wildest anguish filled his breast. "Never fear, Erl Queen, I shall not trouble you with my unwelcome presence!"

And Ruth bit her lips and thought tremulously: "He permits himself to be introduced to me, and means to say by it—that he does not wish to know me better than a new acquaintance."

Erl Queen sat next Prince Leopold, who enter-

tained her in his own peculiar style. Her fresh, natural grace appealed to the fancy of the young Prince ; she was very clever at repartee, and the originality of her views was quite amusing to the royal seaman.

"To-morrow will be Sunday !" said he, " and one must be pious enough to go to church. What kind of a luminary is this new college-preacher, who has gained such an influence over our people since I was here before ? "

" I am sorry that I cannot enlighten Your Highness on that point. I have heard the gentleman but once. "

Countess Sternow raised her head, and Fräulein von Sanden dropped the rose in sudden alarm.

" You don't know him ? " repeated Leopold incredulously, and laughed aloud. " By Jove ! Two years in town and only once in church ? That's famous, Baroness ! What says her Grace, the Mistress-of-the-chase, to such rank heresy ? "

Countess Sternow's eyes glittered ominously. She shook the yellow curls from her shoulders and looked daggers at Ruth.

" I beg your pardon, Prince, " said Ruth quietly, " I go to church every Sunday, but not to hear the college-preacher. "

The face of the Prince grew serious, and he betrayed a lively curiosity.

"Not to the college-preacher?" he repeated, accentuating every syllable. "Where *do* you go?"

"To St. Mark's, where the Councilor of the Consistory preaches, Your Highness," replied Ruth, with quiet dignity. "I like his sermons. In my opinion they carry more weight and depth than the flowery rhetoric of the new-comer."

"You make a very strange, a very bold assertion, Baroness Altingen!" exclaimed Countess Sternow, with biting sarcasm and in a tone of voice so loud that the Dutchess could not help hearing it. "I have——"

"Have the kindness, please, dear Countess, to give me another cup of tea!" interposed Prince Leopold coolly. "But take care that it is not *trop fort*, and, therefore, *bitter*."

"So you go to St. Mark's, Baroness? You have the hardihood to brave public opinion and antagonize the orthodox ladies of our court? I admire your courage: in fact, I noticed from the very start, that you trouble yourself but little about the 'chronique scandaleuse,' in which is booked a record of the conduct of every new arrival that

may seem at all unusual ! I like that, for I shall be your companion in distress in this regard ! ”

Countess Sternow paused a moment in the act of pouring out tea for His Highness.

“Your Highness seems to cast reflections on our humble residence ! ” said she, with mild reproof. “We do not keep a record of the cranks that come and go with every year. There are too many of them in the world to analyze their individual characters, but where it is plain to be seen that certain people, from mere vanity, or to make themselves conspicuous, strive with might and main to challenge public opinion and to defy its dictates, I think it pardonable, nay, right, for society to refuse to entertain a particularly friendly feeling for such offenders ! ”

Ruth met the ironical side-glance of the speaker with a calm, defiant smile ; but over Leopold’s face spread the red dawn of wrath.

“I know that society tolerates no arguments, except its own,” replied he, and folded his arms across his breast, “no matter how conclusive they may be. Society has its bell-wether, whom it follows blindly, and questions not the sophistry with which the way is overgrown. Let them follow. I wish them well, so long as I myself can

hold aloof ; and when the end comes, be transferred to some other Heaven than that which is inhabited by these chosen ones. Baroness, as you are going to St. Mark's in the morning, permit me to accompany you. The old Councilor is a splendid fellow, who keeps his eyes open, and who can be quite severe when necessary. I like him, and we suit each other. But be sure, Baroness, and bring the hymn-book. I fear that mine has been lost, and I am sure I don't remember any of the words."

"I place my book at your disposal, absolutely, Your Highness," said Ruth playfully. "I do not sing myself, and shall be happy to enlist a new tenor for the choir."

"Ah, you're wrong there !" laughed the Prince, good-naturedly. "I sing either too high or too low, and with due expression only when I can accompany myself on my beloved zither." And he hummed a little ditty to the great amusement of his audience. "Just ask Sangoulème, I've often driven him to despair with my musical attempts !" Everybody laughed.

"Apropos !" cried the Duchess and looked at Norbert, "I am told that you sing, M. de Sangoulème, in fact, that you possess a lovely baritone.

Won't you sing for us, Baron? You will find us a very grateful and appreciative audience!"

Norbert arose. His face was deeply flushed with some concealed excitement.

"I am at your service, Your Highness," replied he quietly, "I know how to sing a few ballads with a voice that has never been trained, but my weather-warped fingers must be my excuse for not accompanying myself; they are insurmountable obstacles!"

"Will you accept my aid?" exclaimed Fräulein von Sanden, quickly rising from her seat. "You will find several familiar compositions on the piano—Schumann, Mendelssohn, Schubert—his Miller Songs, for instance . . ."

Norbert followed the young lady to the piano, as she swept gracefully through the room.

He soon found what he wanted. For a moment he hesitated, knitting his brows; then he presented the music to Fräulein von Sanden, and simply said: "Will you kindly accompany me in this?"

"Remembrance" by Baron Goeler Ravensberg, read the lady under her breath.

The prelude began.

The Duchess dropped her needle-work, and raised her face to that of the singer. Princess

Josephine sat with folded hands and drooping head, while Countess Sternow opened her huge fan and fluttered it before her curious face.

Norbert sang.

The notes fell with wondrous warmth and fervor from his lips. Ruth's shapely head was pressed hard against the back of her chair, and her eyes were riveted on Norbert's face. For a moment his dark eyes gazed straight into hers. A strange, wild fear found its way into the girl's heart. She was *alone* amidst the splendors for which she had so yearned ! Before her rose the lonely park around her cherished castle, the cypress-wall near which she had stood, and Norbert's handsome face, as it looked up at her so pleadingly and loyally, imploring Love. "Lost, lost !" whispered the leaves in the breeze, and the echo of the harsh word "lost" trembled through Ruth's vibrating heart.

"Splendid ! superb !" applauded the audience, as Norbert finished. Compliments showered on him. "What a *fortunate* young man !" whispered a voice close by Ruth's ear. "His name will soon be known throughout the world !" It was Herr von Meisenbach who made this flattering prediction.

Fräulein von Sanden arose from the piano, and held out her hand to Norbert. Countess Sternow trailed her fan, and cast admiring eyes upon the singer. Ruth alone was silent. "What cared he, this greatly admired man, for a word of praise from the lips of—*a stranger ?*——"





IX.

THE brightest of sunday-suns shone down upon the villa Olivia. The early morning had been chill and raw ; the first snow-flakes of winter danced through the air, and wove a frosty bridal-veil upon the brow of earth. The statues in the park that surrounded the villa Olivia were covered with sheets of purest white, but as the morning advanced and sun-ray after sun-ray broke through the clouds, shy and timid at first, then gradually lengthening into dazzling sheaves of light, the trees seemed covered with a myriad of gems. The rooms of the villa Olivia were flooded with light. Ruth had just returned from church. She divested herself of hat and furs, and went in quest of Anna. Her footsteps died noiselessly away on the soft rugs. Ruth reached a door that stood ajar. The sound of a familiar voice fell on her

ear and startled her. She seized the portière and drew it softly aside.

In the window stood Ännchen in the bright sunshine, slender and graceful like a silver birch of Altingen. At her side was the young naval officer, lost in loving contemplation of the young girl and aglow with the joy of this, their first meeting since his return.

The little "wood-nymph" prattled a thousand tender words; her arms were wound around her cousin's neck and her head leaned confidently against his breast, as if this was the place of all others that belonged to her, the possession of which no one in God's world could dispute with her!

"A handsome couple!" thought Ruth, "so vastly different and yet so nicely matched!"

Suddenly the girl's breast throbbed with a strange, unknown feeling. She would go in and thrust herself between these two, and tear the young girl from his embrace,—yes, she would challenge her right to stand thus beside him,—who had loved her first!

But Ruth checked herself. "He loved me once," she thought, "but, ah, what cares he *now?*" She pressed her lips tightly together and

passed out of sight with proud and stately air, as noiselessly and unobserved as she had come.

Ännchen looked at her watch.

"It is time that Ruth was back from church," said she eagerly. "I'll tell her that you are here, Norbert. She will be very glad to see you!"

A cloud passed over Norbert's face. "Do you think so, child?" he asked bitterly. "Stay, Ännchen, my visit might disturb the mistress of Altingen, and I should never cease to regret it. My time is up, at any rate; I must return to the castle. Adieu, dear cousin! Do not be angry if I do not come again. I may be detained elsewhere, Ännchen, unless it be next Sunday during church-service." He took his cousin's hands lovingly within his own, and said excitedly: "I am going home in a few days to *Grossmütterchen* and the quiet lodge, to our beloved firs and the sombre clover-dell, where peace and rest are ever to be found. There is our home, dearest; and that's where we belong. This heavy, sultry atmosphere is poisonous to us simple folk. It will paint imitation colors on the cheeks of the innocent forest-blossom and strip it of its childish bloom. It is not well for us, Ännchen, to lift our wings too boldly; the butterfly loses its life when

it soars towards the source of light, and the heart breaks that aspires to Love that is unattainable ! ” He clasped Ännchen’s little hands convulsively. “Come, home, Ännchen, come home ! ” gasped Norbert, as he hurried away as if the ground were burning under his feet. Anna gazed after him in wonderment, then sought Ruth and wound her arms lovingly around her neck :

“Norbert has just been here ; he looks so tall and handsome, Ruth, but he is not happy. You are so good and kind to everybody, ask him, what ails him and help him, help him, dearest Ruth.”





X.

“Come, lovely boy, wilt thou go with me !”

A DIM light was burning in the room of the princess Josephine. All was quiet and peaceful : only Ruth's soft voice was busily talking to the old lady, who sat crouched in her old-fashioned easy-chair with her pale hands folded in her lap. The curtains were drawn. The deep recesses of the windows were overshadowed with dense ivy-vines. The tiny songsters in their gilded prisons tucked their heads beneath their wings, and sat in a row like little fluffy balls. Busts and pictures adorned the walls ; every corner was filled with fragrant flowers. An air of cosiness pervaded the whole apartment ; hundreds of old treasures and faded mementoes were displayed on mantel, consoles and window-sills.

“Dear Ruth,” said the Princess, as she raised herself from her reclining position, clasping the hand of the young girl tenderly, “I thank you for

having told me all you know about the affairs of Herr von Otthardt. You have no idea of the lively interest I entertain for that young man. You have a noble, faithful heart, Ruth ; I loved you from the moment, when your clear, fresh voice told me of the sweet peace of your forest-home, and your pure and innocent sentiments awakened my deepest sympathy. I never grow tired of looking into your truthful eyes, which seem to veil a little inner Eden of innocence. Your presence has not only refreshed me, Ruth, like the odor of a beautiful flower that springs up suddenly amidst the dust—but it has also filled me with happy certainty that in you is revived the spirit of your dear, dead mother, my most faithful friend. I feel that my hopes and desires will be realized in her child, and that I may trust you as blindly as I did my beloved Stephanie.”

Erl Queen covered the hands of the speaker with kisses.

“No greater happiness could fall to my lot, Your Highness,” whispered the girl with eyes aglow, “than to occupy in your heart the place which to my mother meant the greatest blessing of her life.”

“Stephanie shared my happiness without a

grudge, and remained with me steadfastly in my sorrow," whispered the invalid in a far-away look. "She alone witnessed the few rays of sunshine that fell so sparingly athwart my path of life ; she alone stood boldly by me when the storm gathered its cruellest clouds above my head, and she endured with me the innumerable nights of pain and torture, when life and death fought a desperate battle for the possession of the body and soul of a young girl. But all this is past, *now* ; Stephanie is dead, and I am doomed by destiny to live to see the day dawn when my feeble hands shall save the son of Otthardt from ruin and disgrace, and therefore I am glad that I have lived and suffered. What cares the young officer for the old lady in the lonely castle-wing ? What knows he of me, who am always ailing and visible to no one ? To him I am dead, for he does not even come to ask my aid. Is he, perhaps, too proud ? Proud as his father, who chose to crush the heart within his breast rather than lose the favor of his sovereign ? Such pride has its value, for the world bows before it ! "

Josephine paused a moment, for in the adjoining room Fräulein von Nievendloh's irritable voice was heard ordering the water for the tea,

and exclaiming emphatically that the clock had struck seven some time ago.

"Alice is growing impatient," whispered the Princess, and cast a timid look toward the door. "Let us be brief, dear Ruth——ah, what is it, Hoveland? I did not wish to be disturbed!" she addressed herself to the valet, who stood hesitatingly in the door.

"M. de Sangoulème, in the name of His Grace, the Prince, Your Highness!"

"Bring him to me, Hoveland!" nodded the old lady. "But turn up the lights first! You may go now!——I will ask him to step into the adjoining room for a moment," she continued, with an excuse to Ruth. "I am sure, he is coming to announce my nephew, Leopold, to tea!"

Ruth sprang to her feet, and snatched her gloves. She was trembling, and sought vainly for words to effect her dismissal. She decided to plead a sudden head-ache, with the promise of returning in the morning: but before she could collect her senses Hoveland had drawn the portière aside and Norbert stood before them.

Princess Josephine was right; Sangoulème had been sent by Leopold, to announce the latter's coming to tea.

"Why did you not bring him with you?" asked the invalid with a cordial smile. "Such formality is much against his custom."

"His Highness was engaged at the last moment," explained the young naval officer, "and a speedy adjustment of the matter was not to be expected. Hence my mission as herald!"

"Which is a peaceful one, judging by the symbol," laughed Her Highness, pointing to a lovely tea-rose, which Sangoulème carried in his hand. "Do you wear your rose in your coat-of-arms, Baron, or are you the lucky possessor of the magic wand in the fairy-books with which you charm the loveliest flowers from ice and snow?"

"Unfortunately, the good fairies declined to be my god-mothers, Your Highness! If they had not, I might have caused many a crust of ice to melt. But I have **been** lucky enough to find this flower by the way-side, and beg that you will condescend to accept it from my hands!" Sangoulème had risen, and presented the rose to the Princess with a modest smile.

The Princess took the flower from the young man's hand with cordial thanks, and drank in with delight its delicate fragrance.

"You certainly cannot wish to condemn this

lovely flower to languish in the hands of an old lady, M. de Sangoulème," said she. "That would be cruel, I think, and I will not permit it! Come, dear Ruth, kneel down before me. You are much better suited than I to wear our friend's sweet gift."

A deep glow spread over Ruth's face. A sudden feeling of fear nearly caused her to faint, as she looked at de Sangoulème, to meet in his eyes again that mysterious glance, tempered this time by a glad light. With faltering voice the girl attempted to remonstrate, but Josephine caught her hand and drew her gently down beside her. "I girdle thy brow with roses, little Figaro!" quoted she merrily, and fastened the flower in the golden coils of the young girl.

"The rose may well be proud of its new place, Fräulein von Altingen," said Norbert, with a passing salute. His voice thrilled with suppressed excitement. "I am grateful for the distinction granted my poor gift."

It was the first time that he had addressed Ruth direct, but he was forced to utter a polite phrase, lest his conduct should arouse comment.

"I will have to make the best of it," said Ruth lightly, "and deck myself in borrowed plumes by

wearing flowers that were never plucked for me. But as you are gallant and knightly enough to submit to the inevitable, I cannot see that I have any cause for regret.—I was glad to learn that you have called on your cousin, Anna, and hope you will be able to carry to the lodge only good reports of her, and to assure grandmother that her little woodland-flower is happy and content in her friend's home."

"Anna told me of her visit to you—with unbounded delight and gratitude," replied Norbert hurriedly, "and as far as I am able to judge from two little ballads she sang for me, she is indebted to your kindness for an almost perfect training of her voice."

"Is this young lady, who is visiting Fräulein von Altingen, your cousin?" asked the Princess with a friendly smile. "Ruth has often spoken to me of her exquisite voice, and Fräulein von Nievendloh takes great interest in her also. You have not yet met my Lady-in-waiting, M. de Sangoulème? She is a very clever and animated companion!" The Princess extended her hand to the young officer, and continued urbanely: "Will you pardon me, Baron, if I ask you to step into the adjoining room for a moment? There

you will find Fräulein Alice von Nievendloh. I have a trifling matter to discuss with Fräulein Ruth, and want to dispose of it at once, so as to devote myself afterwards entirely to the young people."

"As Your Highness directs," replied Norbert, bending low over the hand of the invalid, and drawing it reverently to his lips. Norbert withdrew and Josephine touched the little silver bell on the marble-table by her side.

A window was noisily shut in the adjoining room; a pair of high heels clattered over the polished floor and a moment later the portière was pushed aside. In the frame of the door appeared the graceful form of the Nievendloh.

"I have made the tea for the third time," pouted the pretty lips impertinently, and the frown over the penciled eye-brows grew deeper. "It is already half-past seven, Your Highness, and the doctor has urgently requested that the meals should be taken regularly. I wash my innocent hands of it, if Your Highness falls ill on account of these delays!" She threw back her head defiantly and turned to go.

A soft red suffused the cheeks of the Princess.

"Alice," cried she timorously, "I regret that

my conversation with the Baroness Altingen has caused you double trouble with the tea, but in spite of it I must ask you to make it once more. M. de Sangoulème has just come to announce my nephew, Leopold, as a guest for the evening!"

The little Lady-in-waiting had turned around with a contemptuous shrug of her shoulders, and flashed an angry look at the Princess, as she uttered this new command; but when the gentle voice of the invalid pronounced Sangoulème's name, Alice whirled around as if electrified, and discovered the handsome figure of the young mariner in the shadow of the tamarind trees. It seemed as if an invisible hand had passed over the garrulous face and smoothed away the faintest wrinkle of discontent. As if by magic Fräulein Alice was transformed into a lovely woman. The small mouth, with its lips already parted for a sharp retort, was suddenly wreathed in charming smiles, and her dark eyes were raised to Sangoulème's with a joyous greeting.

She advanced hurriedly to the center of the room and stopped immediately beneath the rosy light of the lamp, bowing gracefully before Sangoulème in answer to his ceremonious salute.

"For such august and charming company I

shall be glad to make the tea a fourth, or even a fifth time, Your Highness!" exclaimed she with a silvery laugh, raising her dimpled hand to adjust the soft ringlets over her forehead. "What a genuine surprise on the part of Prince Leopold! It is fortunate indeed that Ruth's visit delayed the usual hour for tea! Let me give you an extra hug for this, little Erl Queen!" She stooped and blinked her eyes archly at Ruth. "Is it not a singular title, Your Highness," continued Alice gaily. "Erl Queen is Fräulein von Altingen's nick-name, because this queer lady of the castle has a passion for rambling among alders and willows!" And Alice laughed louder than before.

"Among alders and willows?" repeated Josephine, casting a questioning look at Ruth, who had withdrawn to the recess of the window and was bending over a bird-cage whose feathered inmates had been startled from sleep by the loud voice of the Nievendloh.

"Yes, yes, Your Highness," continued Alice frivolously, "there is a gruesome little phantom-valley near Castle Altingen, called 'Clover-dell.' This is the official realm of the Erl Queen. Near the brook grows an old stump of a willow that figures as throne in this singular kingdom. It is

said that Ruth frequents this place, even at night, and I am satisfied that, despite her bland and innocent air, she is waiting for some unfortunate lad to 'do him harm,' as is customary with this uncanny tribe of royalty."

Fräulein von Nievendloh had chattered away so vivaciously, that she did not observe the effect her words had produced. Sangoulème's pale face was turned upon Ruth, who stood almost hidden from view in the shadow of the ivy-arbor.

"Too bad, my gracious lady, that this interesting communication cannot traverse the town on wings as a sweet morsel of gossip," said Norbert with a forced smile. "I am sure many a court-cavalier would brave the fatal ride into the Cloverdell, even if he knew at the start that his daring venture would eventuate in tragedy!"

Ruth turned her head. A strangely frozen expression rested on her mouth.

"Even worse than that, M. de Sangoulème," replied she dryly; "the heroes of our modern dramas awaken one's sympathy, while one is forced to look disdainfully upon a dare-devil, who pries into the mysteries of ghosts and crosses the way of the Erl Queen! Such presumption cannot claim the slightest sympathy!"

Norbert frowned darkly.

“Up to the present day no mortal has dared with impunity to cope with phantoms, and we have just been convinced that the Erl Queen does not belie her origin, as regards the cruelty of her fair sister nymphs. It is said of those who have looked into the eyes of this phantom-shadow that they inevitably become her victim, and it is likely therefore that our modern sir knights of the Bourse and the racecourse will hesitate some time before risking a nocturnal ramble through the clover-dell; but should some foolhardy youth be beguiled into such an ambitious undertaking, I shall not hesitate to warn him of his danger. It is easier to find the ‘philosopher’s stone’ than to awaken a spark of sympathy in the heart of the Erl Queen!”

Ruth bit her lips and pressed her hands tightly upon the small bronze pier-table. The Princess smiled, and shook her finger menacingly at Norbert.

“It sounds as if your last hypothesis was based on sad experience, M. de Sangoulème. Are you one of those daring mariners, who venture in the path of these dangerous sirens?”

“It would not surprise me to know that the

naiads come from their cool depths to create sad havoc among young sea-farers!" said Alice softly, with an eloquent glance at de Sangoulème.

Norbert stared at the pattern of the carpet at his feet.

"One would naturally suppose, Your Highness, that during the many years I have been on the sea I must have had opportunities enough to make the dangerous acquaintance of such beautiful sea-spirits. But, unfortunately for us, we have never been drawn on to the rocks by their seductive songs, nor have Neptune's green-eyed daughters awakened a yearning in our breasts for their company. I say 'unfortunately,' for I have never more than at this moment bewailed my poverty in such mysterious experiences."

"Do you mean to say, that you have never had an adventure?" asked Alice with wistful glances.

"M. de Sangoulème, have you never in your life met with something unreal and out of the common run?"

"If you count will-o'-the-wisps among this class of creatures, I stand convicted," smiled Norbert, with a hasty glance at Ruth, who suddenly emerged from behind the ivy-vines resting her arms upon the elaborately carved back of a

chair. "I met such a little goblin one night, and the mystic spark tempted me to pursue a way the end of would be called presumptuous by the Baroness Altingen. But that was long ago, and with the will-o'-the-wisp on the shadowy heath my faith in fairy-tales is dead and gone forever!"

Ruth stooped quickly to pick up the lace handkerchief that had slipped from Josephine's lap. Alice drew a little nearer the handsome naval officer, and clapped her hands in boundless merriment.

"Goodness gracious, over your sparkling will-o'-the-wisps I am forgetting my alcohol lamp—and the water for the tea will all have boiled away. I beg to be dismissed for a few moments to attend to my housewifely duties. When may we expect Prince Leopold? Shall I wait a little longer, or might it not be as well to have everything in readiness?"

"One moment, Alice!" said the Princess, "I beg to ask that you will appoint M. De Sangoulème adjutant on your personal staff, and acquaint him at once with the duties of his new position. The service is light, Baron," continued Josephine, addressing herself to Norbert. "Fräulein von Nievendloh tyrannizes over people by her amiability."

"And I will endeavor to be like wax in her

hands," replied the young officer gallantly, as he bowed respectfully and followed the pretty Lady-in-waiting into the adjoining room.

"And now, dear Ruth, let us finish as quickly as possible," continued Josephine. "Leopold may arrive at any moment, and I am anxious that everything should be clear between us before the evening passes."

"Yes indeed, Your Highness!" was Erl Queen's preoccupied rejoinder.

From the room beyond Alice's saucy laughter fell on her ear, and the girl sighed as she thought of the seductive eyes of the Nievendloh, unfolding all her charms in honor of the unwary Sangoulème. Would he resist the temptation?

"You yourself have said, dear Ruth, that Otthardt's affairs brook no delay; and I am resolved to help him at once with all the means at my command." The Princess paused, and pressed her lace handkerchief to her quivering lips. "I have hoarded my secret savings for years to be able to buy for my nephew, Leopold, the handsome estate of Prince H. . . . with whose magnificent hunting-grounds he is very much in love. It has been a favorite thought of mine to surprise him on one of his birth-days with this beautiful

acquisition ; but if this is out of the question I'll purchase something more modest with which to give him pleasure—for in his honest, unspoilt heart he is grateful for the smallest favor ! ”

Ruth nodded her head in mute assent. The tea-cups clattered in the supper-room, and now and then Norbert's sonorous voice was heard above the din.

“ I will devote this capital to the cancelling of the debts of Lieutenant Otthardt,” continued the Princess excitedly, “ but I have still some scruples . . . ”

Ruth looked at her questioningly. “ In regard to what, Your Highness ? ” The old lady blushed softly, evidently in some embarrassment.

“ I do not desire that anyone should know of this affair. Not even Otthardt himself must surmise from what quarter help has come. His gratitude would be painful to me. I cannot explain this to you, my dear Fräulein von Altingen, for these are sad old stories, and at the slightest breath they flame and burn anew.”

Princess Josephine sighed profoundly, and tears filled her eyes. Ruth threw herself on her knees before the invalid, and in mute reverence covered the frail hands with kisses.

"Then Lieutenant Otthardt will not be permitted to come before Your Highness to thank you in person?" whispered the girl softly. "The thought of bringing him to you has made me very happy."

The hands of the Princess trembled; she withdrew them quickly from Ruth's encircling fingers and placed them caressingly on the fair brow of her young friend.

"Oh, no, no!" exclaimed she hurriedly, "I am not well enough to receive strangers, least of all *him*—an Otthardt. I desire no thanks for an act of charity and benevolence which would be desecrated were it to bargain for the praises of the world. Who knows, but that it would even meet with public disapprobation—for people have evil tongues, and are ready to drag the holiest sentiments in the mire. I have a favor to ask of you, little Erl Queen, a very great favor! Shall I ask in vain?"

Ruth was perplexed. "If it lies within my power to fulfil a wish of yours, Your Highness——"

Josephine smiled. "Certainly, dear child; and therefore I do not hesitate to ask it! You are grave and prudent, Ruth, beyond your years, and

I know, I feel you are devoted to me. Formerly I should have looked to Stephanie under similar circumstances—now I appeal to the heart of her child. Will you undertake the task of placing the capital in question into the Lieutenant's hand, and above all, will you let it appear as a gift from yourself?" She caught Ruth's hands in her own and looked pleadingly into her eyes. "Everybody knows that you are rich, my dear child. Otthardt himself must be aware of that fact, and your action will not be considered very unusual. I know of several cases, where young ladies have made a similar sacrifice to save from ruin some young cavalier, who was not quite indifferent to them!"

"Your Highness!" cried Ruth, in sudden alarm. "Great heavens, if Herr von Otthardt should misconstrue this involuntary generosity on my part?"

The old lady looked questioningly into the speaker's eyes. "Would Erl Queen consider it so much amiss?" smiled she with gentle playfulness. "When one has danced so often with the handsomest officer of the garrison, and is so well informed as to the color of his large, 'famously beautiful' eyes, such a trifling misunderstanding

ought not to count for much ! Am I not right, dear Ruth, and will you not do as I ask—I, an old lady—and take this whole affair into your own energetic little hands ?”

Ruth was stupefied. A momentous fear assailed her, and a voice in her heart sounded an alarm : “Go back, before it is too late ! You do not love the stranger ; your heart belongs to the proud man who once carried you in his arms through the clover-dell, and whose spirit you have stabbed to death !”

From the adjoining room came a loud burst of hilarity : It was Norbert’s voice that Ruth heard. The girl listened anxiously, and her heart throbbed wildly as he said : “Give yourself no concern, Fräulein von Nievendloh : I am ready to go through fire and water for you !” The silver clattered, the tea-cups kept up a genial din, and Alice replied in soft and honied tones.

Ruth sprang to her feet, and clenched her little hands ; an angry flush suffused her face.

“Yes, Your Highness,” said she quickly and huskily, “I will attend to the affair. No matter what comes of it, I will abide the consequences !”

Josephine arose, wound her arms around Ruth’s shoulders and drew the girl’s head gently to her

breast, imprinting a warm kiss on her feverish brow. "I thank you, my dear child!" said she softly.

The Princess crossed the room and paused before her gold-enameled writing-desk, the middle compartment of which she opened. "One moment, dear child, I will arrange it at once!"

Ruth paced slowly up and down the room, and stopped before the open fireplace, staring into the writhing flames. Her fingers closed mechanically around the brass tongs and stirred the glowing embers. Her left arm leaned heavily upon the pedestal of the bronze-statue on the mantel, and the red glare of the fire-light fell full upon her pale, anxious face. Thus stood Ruth awaiting her doom.

Prince Leopold had just reached the outer corridor. "Eh, Hoveland, you good old muskrat, are you still alive? Glad to see you, Heaven knows!" exclaimed the Prince gaily, patting the back of the old and faithful servitor. "I could not imagine my aunt's little nest complete without your friendly grinning countenance. How have you been all these years, eh?"

Tears of pleasure filled old Hoveland's eyes.

"Oh, Your Highness—how kind—how kind of

you," faltered he, hardly daring to raise his snow-white head. "God has been good to me, that he has let me live to see this day!" And the old man folded his trembling hands and cast a grateful look heavenward.

"Did you think of me occasionally, Hoveland?" continued Leopold, his hands crossed behind his back. "Yes, yes, old man, we were always the best of friends, and I shall always remember it. How is your gout?"

"I can't complain, Your Highness, so long as I am able to be at my post, although my old dis-jointed bones are rather shaky!"

"By Jove! And how are your bull-finches, that you trained so well? Are they still alive and singing 'the dear, old midnight-hour'?"

Hoveland's face beamed with gratitude. "So Your Highness remembers? Yes, I am still the anxious guardian of that feathery family. Last winter I lost two young males; it was too cold near the window, and during the confusion of the Christmas-days nobody paid attention to the little warblers. But the rest are still piping the 'peaceful midnight-hour.' How kind of your Highness to remember it all so well!"

"Why shouldn't I, my good old whiskerandos?"

laughed the Prince, rubbing his hands gleefully. "You made me a present once of two of your finest songsters, and the little goblins drove me nearly crazy with their 'peaceful midnight-hour!' Heavens, when I think of it! At the break of day the noise began, and ended with the *peaceful midnight-hour* indeed! The fun did not last long, however, for one day my Danish hound got too near the cage—and . . ."

Hoveland sighed, and looked the picture of woe. "The great big brute!" The words slipped unconsciously from his lips.

"Yes, it was too bad; they were a pair of splendid singers. Tell me, Hoveland, what has become of your 'Minchen'?"

"Our 'Minchen'?" repeated the old man with shining eyes. "Does Your Highness remember our 'Minchen'? Thank God, our little girl is happily married to the court-tinsmith in the 'Rathhaus-Gasse.' He carried her off to a cosy little nest. There is no want or trouble there! It was a great relief to the house-mother and myself, for she was all we had, our 'Minchen,' a good, obedient child," and the old man wiped away a tear with the back of his hand.

"Yes, she was very good!" nodded the Prince,

passing his hand through his bushy hair. "And good-looking besides, with cheeks like painted Christmas-apples, and a pair of braids longer than I could plait with the tail of my roan. But don't you know, my dear old white-poll, what I always considered best of all about your 'Minchen'? The immense larded cake that she baked every Friday afternoon! Hoveland, I have often thought of that cake with mingled joy and sadness. It was the most lasting monument your 'Minchen' erected for herself in my heart. By Jove, if my august father could have had an idea that his youngest hopeful was wearing out his clothes on 'Mam'selle Minchen's' kitchen-table every Friday afternoon, until that most delicious and aromatic of all cakes emerged in gigantic proportions from the bake-oven! Hoveland, I tell you, I shall never forget the blissful hours I spent in your kitchen, even if a kindly fate should make me monarch of Utopia! Heaven is my witness that your 'Minchen's' larded cake had never faded from my memory, nor ceased to be the object of delightful dreams!" And Leopold's hand fell heavily upon the shoulder of the aged servant, whose knees trembled beneath the weight of such princely joviality.

“And now, my dear fellow, I’ll go to my aunt, or we shall be caught standing here to-morrow morning wresting the reputation of the first chatter-boxes of the town from the hands of friend Meisenbach !”

“I will be off at once to announce you to Her Highness,” said Hoveland, and hobbled diligently in advance of the young Prince.

“Hey ! old man ! where are you going ?” cried Leopold, and caught hold of his coat collar. “Announce me ? *Me* ? I know this place much better than my own coat-pocket and am familiar with every mousehole on the premises, unless you have plugged them up since. Stay where you are, and don’t move a step, or I shall pray the Archangel Gabriel to set all his bull-finches whistling the ‘peaceful midnight-hour !’ God bless you, old fellow !” and, stealing away on tip-toe, the Prince traversed the long corridor and disappeared noiselessly behind the entrance to the reception-room.

Hoveland folded his feeble hands and nodded his head in mute rejoicing. “So great a Seigneur, yet so good and friendly—remembers my bull-finches and my ‘Minchen’ and the larded cake God preserve him !”

The velvet carpet deadened Leopold's footsteps. He reached the door of the adjoining room unobserved and pushed the portière softly aside, then paused and gazed in silent contemplation at the scene before him. He dared scarcely breathe for fear of breaking the spell. Ruth was still standing by the fire-place with her eyes fixed immovably on the burning flames; the weird light was reflected on her face and made it stand out from the dark background like some rare cameo. For the first time in his life the Prince was attracted by the beauty of a girlish head. The expression of Ruth's countenance was grim and gloomy; her brows were knit, and her lips were pressed tightly together with the stamp of iron resolution. Her face pleased Leopold. There was no comparison between her and the laughing women of the wanton carnival and the singular gloom of the childish face, the contrast between the flashing eyes of beautiful coquettes, and the proud and passionate look in the countenance of this young girl! Leopold could hardly move: his eyes devoured her. Ruth must have felt his intense look, for she raised her head and glanced absently in the direction of the door. "Prince Leopold!" she exclaimed, startled, and advanced

to meet him. The bronze tongs fell with a clash from her hands.

In the door stood the tall figure of the Prince ; the top of his fair head almost grazed the lintel, and on his breast sparkled the diamond star of the archducal order. "Albrecht, the 'bear'!" thought Ruth.

"Good evening, ladies. Have I astonished you? You look at me with as horrified an expression, Fräulein von Altingen, as if I were indeed Imperial Cesar's ghost!" Leopold laughed gaily. But his wonted sauciness was forced. "And you *might* shake hands—unless you think Madame Grundy would object?"

He held out his right palm and covered with it Ruth's pink fingers. The little hand disappeared like a snow-flake in the royal sailor's powerful grasp.

"Madame Grundy may safely be ignored occasionally, Your Highness!" smiled Ruth archly, "and as for Shakespeare's gruesome phantom-figure, even that would be a welcome guest, if it prognosticated such an amiable visitor."

Leopold crossed his hands over his breast and bowed with profound ceremony before the Mistress of Altingen: "Allow me to kiss your hand.

Baroness!" He turned abruptly and walked over to Princess Josephine, whose eyes were raised for a moment from the secret drawer in her writing-desk.

"Good evening, dearest Auntie!" He wound his arms around her shoulders, raised her chin tenderly with his forefinger and imprinted a kiss on her mouth. "Here I am! Have you any use for Sangoulème and myself this evening, or are we to be sent back home?"

"No, my darling boy, you are always welcome, and so are all your friends," answered Josephine, passing her hand caressingly over the still boyish head, as it bent down to her. "But your coming surprises me, I thought you were going to the theatre!"

"The theatre! Why, this is ballet-night, dear Auntie!"

"Yes, and one of the best performances upon our stage. Your arrival has been heralded all over the city, and you are undoubtedly expected to occupy the royal box!"

"And for the sake of satisfying the curiosity of a mob I am expected to sit still for two or three hours and watch a couple of women sprain their ankles? No, Aunt Josephine, that is asking too

much! What are you doing at the desk? Ah, the third drawer! How well I remember it! In this very corner stood the box with the macaroons, which you dealt out to me according to my desserts; nay, better, better far. Whenever I thought of you, the macaroons used to come into my mind! You two were inseparable in my memory!"

"What an ungallant man!" cried the Princess, gently shaking her head. She turned toward Ruth, handing her two sealed envelopes.

"Here, my dear Ruth, I will lay them in this alabaster-vase. Take them with you when you go, and remind me of it, please. There is another trifle, I want; it must be in the jewel-casket on my toilet-table; I will fetch it at once, then nothing will be forgotten,—please, dear Leopold, be kind enough to pull the bell-rope."

A moment or two later the door was noiselessly opened, and an old lady in black silk bowed herself across the threshold. A fresh white cap covered her silvery hair, and the aged face was cramped of wrinkles, large and small.

"Ah, Frau Rössel! Bless me, if this is not Mother Rössel!" cried Leopold with outstretched arms. "There is nothing missing in this dear,

old hole, now that Frau Rössel has appeared on the scene ! How is your health ? I see you not only alive but you look like a girl of sixteen, as young and charming as a rose——”

“Oh, Your Highness, the gracious Prince !” The old lady bent over Leopold’s outstretched hand and kissed it fervently. “God be praised that Your Highness has returned to us so well and happy !” Leopold, alarmed almost by this display of ardent devotion on the part of Frau Rössel, withdrew his hand abruptly, but before he could relieve his overflowing heart by a few more pleasantries, Josephine stood beside him and touched his arm. “There is scant time now, dear boy, for such effusions. Wait until after tea ! Take me to my dressing-room, Rössel—your arm, please. I will be back immediately, and then we will have tea at last, dear children !”

Still rubbing his hand, which the old lady had kissed so warmly, Leopold threw himself into a chair. Ruth was seated opposite to him. “Would you believe it, Fräulein von Altingen, that this is the first time in my life, that my hand has been kissed ?” asked he, shaking his head thoughtfully. “I fear you think me arrogant ?”

“That is impossible, Your Highness,” laughed

Ruth. "Besides, it is very important to become accustomed to such acts of devotion."

"Yes, yes," sighed Leopold with sudden gravity, which disappeared as quickly as it came. "Where in the world is Sangoulème? I thought I heard his voice in the adjoining room?"

"He is there, Your Highness, helping Fräulein von Nievendloh to make the tea!" Ruth turned her pretty head aside; chill sarcasm was in her voice.

"The Nievendloh?" and Leopold frowned. "That is the last misfortune I could desire should befall him—or any man!" His fingers beat an impatient tattoo on the table. "Sangoulème has had but little intercourse with the ladies of society; I fear he may be dazzled, and take brass for gold. Bah, he is no longer a child!" The Prince passed his hand thoughtfully over his forehead, and fixed his eyes on Erl Queen's quiet face.

"What a beautiful rose you have in your hair, Fräulein von Altingen; but you will lose it presently!"

"Is it not lovely?" exclaimed Ruth, and raised her hand to fasten in the flower more securely.

"I am very proud of it!"

For a moment profound silence reigned—then Leopold arose quickly and pushed his chair aside.

“Fräulein Ruth,” begged he with faltering voice, “give *me* that rose!” Ruth looked at him aghast; her lovely face was white as death.

“Your Highness—it has but just been given me!”

“By whom?” demanded he, with most unusual vehemence.

Ruth hesitated for a moment. “Her Grace, your aunt, with her own hands fastened it in my hair, and——no, no, Your Highness, I cannot part with it!”

“My aunt Josephine?” His gloomy frown vanished quickly, and the Prince laughed aloud. “I pledge you my word, that I will reconcile her and ask her to indemnify you for its loss: but you must give me the rose. It is the first favor I have ever asked of you, Fräulein von Altingen,” he continued softly, “must I plead in vain?”

“Your Highness,” cried Ruth passionately, “I would gladly give you all I have to give—except this rose!”

She retreated quickly and shook her little head energetically. Her abrupt movement caused the

flower to fall from the soft coils, and, scattering petals as it fell, it slipped noiselessly to the floor. "Do you see, the rose does not even want to stay with you!" exclaimed Leopold, stooping quickly and picking up the flower. He held it tightly in his hands. "Only one little sprig has remained steadfast, the one with the sharpest thorns. Allow me to keep my share, Fräulein von Altingen—it is a fair division—the tender blossom belongs to me, while you remain its chivalrous protector!"

"The thorn!" murmured Ruth. The hand which she had raised to take back the flower fell by her side at the ominous words of the Prince, then clutched almost unconsciously her wildly palpitating heart, which had so lately for the first time been stung by the dread thorn of anguish. In the room beyond Sangoulème was jesting and laughing. He had buried the dream of his love with the dying will-o'-the-wisp! Why should she, Erl Queen, want to wear the rose, a flower that his hand had not plucked for her?

"And now, Fräulein von Altingen, do me the favor to look pleasant again!" cried Leopold, full of mirth, as he fastened the remnant of the rose in his button-hole. "Believe me, my aunt

Josephine would forgive you anything except the thwarting of her favorite nephew's whim."

"It is the consciousness of that fact alone that consoles me, Your Highness!" replied Ruth with down-cast eyes. "And I wish with all my heart that your joy may not prove as short-lived as its emblem!"

She smiled, but the smile was one of pain. The curtains of the door were parted and Alice peeped into the room.

"Ah, Your Highness! Welcome at home a thousand times!" She crossed her hands over her breast and made Leopold a profound courtesy.

"I am the last perhaps to offer you my greeting, but I supplement it with the pregnant saying: last, not least!"

"I am greatly obliged, my gracious Fräulein von Nievendloh!" exclaimed the Prince in his gayest mood. "Faded garlands fulfil their mission just as well—where they serve to welcome a late arrival! Bonsoir, Sangoulème! I hope the tea is not too sweet?"

"As you seem to be able to choose among fresh ones, you can well do without my faded flowers!" chirped Alice, with a significant glance

at the rose on Leopold's breast, "and none brings greater joy to its owner than the flower which he has boldly wrested from the hands of spring!"

"That would be a difficult thing to do in the month of November, my gracious lady!" replied the young Prince with subtle irony. "And besides, I hope you do not mean to accuse me of such questionable pursuits. Could not a rose be given, Fräulein Alice? Don't you know as much from experience?"

Norbert stood among them like an image of stone. His eyes sought Ruth's and were fixed firmly upon the down-cast face. They were almost uncanny in their immobility.

"Given?" repeated the Lady-in-waiting sarcastically. "Then I can only congratulate you the second time, Your Highness!" and bending toward him she said coaxingly: "For safety's sake such tender gifts should be intrusted to a gentleman's portfolio. One of these little precious leaves might be lost, or indiscreet tongues might seek to find the grove in which it grew!"

"Indeed? That might be your way, my gracious lady!" said the Prince. The corners of his mouth twitched ironically. "I thank you for the well-meant hint, for I am inexperienced in

such gay affairs ; although I will endeavor to become your scholar ! And now, let us go and await Aunt Josephine's return at the tea-table. Please, follow us ! ”

He turned toward Ruth, but the girl was so far away from him that he could not offer her his arm without committing an overt act of discourtesy toward the Nievendloh. He gave the latter his arm, and led her through the open door into the adjoining apartment.

For a moment Ruth and Norbert stood face to face. The young seaman's eyes were riveted upon the girl's countenance. It was an indescribable look and seemed to penetrate her soul. He raised his arm slowly and held the portière apart. His face was set and impenetrable: he made no move to offer her his arm, but stood at his post with almost a dictatorial air. As Ruth passed by him and crossed the narrow sill that divided them, it seemed as if an insurmountable barrier was growing up between these two young hearts, separating them for time and eternity.

Prince Leopold's study was located on the ground-floor of the left wing of the castle. It adjoined his bed-room and a suite of apartments

formerly occupied by his instructor. A long row of rooms, not inhabited by anyone, extended on both sides of it, as well as the library, the cabinet of antiques and the picture-gallery.

The windows of Leopold's rooms opened on the park, and the handsome chestnut-avenue which led past the old-fashioned "lion-gate," that had not been opened or renovated for years. A dense growth of moss covered the heads of the lions which lent their name to the gate-way. On the other side the windows overlooked the noisy market-square, in the center of which stood a statue of the ducal ancestor and sovereign. The cupola of the cathedral gleamed feebly in the background, flanked on either side by the colonnade of the museum, the opera-house and the conservatory of music.

According to his express desire, nothing had been changed in the Prince's rooms. They still bore in every trivial detail the stamp of a genuine bachelor habitation. Bright rays of sunlight streamed through the tall glass-panes, more framed than covered with heavy, long-fringed jute curtains of plain leather-color; a sofa and two high-back easy chairs, more comfortable than æsthetic, harmonized in tint with the dull tones. The bal-

ance of the furniture was of carved oak in the style of the Renaissance. The panels of the cupboards and the tops of the chairs were adorned with the arms of the ducal house. A tall well-filled book-case, stuffed birds and far-extending antlers, statues in terra-cotta and in marble, all kinds of weapons grouped along the trophied walls, bespoke the various likings of the owner of the rooms. Over the sofa hung an old-fashion portrait of his mother, while other pictures and photographs of the members of the ducal family were grouped on tables, desks and mantel. The most prominent among them was that of the Princess Josephine.

In the middle of the room on the brightly polished floor stood a table of heavy oak, and before one easy-chair was spread the skin of a Siberian wolf. Prince Leopold bestrode the corner of the massive table, whittling a rod. He was whistling a merry tune, and his hands were so busy that the shavings flew to the right and left.

Sangoulème had just come in. With his arms crossed over his breast, he leaned against the table beside the Prince, gazing vacantly after the white flakes as they rained from Leopold's knees over the well-waxed floor.

“What’s it going to be, old fellow?” laughed the Prince. “I will tell you! My aunt Josephine has in her room a gilded cage full of canaries, that a couple of silly lackey hands have rigged with a pair of brightly polished brass rods, to the infinite disgust of the poor bipeds. It is a wonder that they did not say ‘adieu’ at once to this dark vale of sorrow!” The Prince braced the wooden stick against his breast and cut a pair of notches in each end. “This morning I rambled all over the garden in search of some elder-bushes, to the great distress of the gardener, who possibly imagined that I was hunting for wild boars in his costly shrubberies, or taking birds out of their nests—as in the day of yore. I found a fagot in an outhouse”—the shavings flew again wildly through the room—“and pretty soon I’ll go over there and make the unfortunate minstrels happy.”

The Prince inclined his head, and blew the curling fibres from his knees and sleeves, before setting to work on the other stick.

Sangoulème, who was familiar with the ways of his noble patron, smiled.

“Do you intend to pay your visit in the other wing before the ball, Your Highness?” asked Norbert, casting a furtive look at his watch.

"It is beginning to grow dark, and I fear the little warblers will not receive a visitor so late in the evening. It is half-past four, with a cloudy sky threatening snow."

Leopold looked up quickly from his work. "By Jove, this *is* the night of the ball! I was nearly forgetting all about it! No, not quite so bad as that, for I engaged my partner last night! Ha, ha! Sangoulème, if my worthy brother only knew that his sea-bear is going to dance to-night, and has already made sure of the first number on the programme!" Prince Leopold jumped from his seat on the table, wound one arm around Norbert's neck, and gazed into his face: "Old fellow, you'll have to give me credit at least for displaying good taste! You snatch your fair-haired or dark-eyed damsels from the side of solicitous mothers, while I dip my nets into the calm waters of long-forgotten fair-splendor, and lead the 'Erl Queen' to the dance."

A cloud appeared on Norbert's brow; he turned his face aside to avoid Leopold's clever eyes. "Erl Queen is a dismal appellation," he said gloomily, "for the myth of a doomed lad is forever linked with the name!"

The Prince laughed softly. "A myth, Sangoulème—you are right, a myth! An idle spectre-form that cannot frighten healthy nerves, although it weaves around the charming little will-o'-the-wisp the subtile magic of impending danger! You were always a dreamer, Norbert, who beholds the inevitable clouds a-drift across the brightest sun-light, rather than bask supinely in the glory of the azure, while it deigns to smile upon the world!" Leopold laid both his hands on the shoulders of the handsome man before him, and gazed searchingly into his eyes. "You have always been grave and quiet, Sangoulème, as long as I have known you; and it was just that which drew me to you with such headlong force, and secured my warmest friendship. But since yesterday you are changed; you are *distract*, and answer me in monosyllables. Perhaps you are bored, or the frown on your forehead forebodes a storm. What is it, old fellow? out with it! Are you hungry, or in love? It *must* be the one thing or the other!"

Norbert smiled, and seized the proffered hand of the speaker with a cordial grasp.

"My heart is with the deep-green ocean-waves, and I yearn for our beloved *Nelson*, on whose

see-sawing deck I am at home, where all my whims are lulled to rest—I have been thinking——”

“Silly thoughts!” broke in Prince Leopold saucily, “that’s all I want to know. In your eyes nothing is a whim but love—Ergo—you are in love! Don’t contradict me, dear friend, I will not brook any of your idle excuses. That’s just why you were so silent last night, and lost in the profound contemplation of your vis-à-vis! It must have been an exciting task to watch the alcohol lamp burn in company with Fräulein Alice? Eh! A pretty woman, the Nievendloh! What color are her eyes? Black or brown?”

“They are decidedly handsome, at any rate!” said Norbert with a queer smile and a shrug of his shoulders. “And as Your Highness is interested in the details, I will do my best to study them carefully this evening.”

The Prince had suddenly grown serious. He turned abruptly and resumed his seat on the edge of the table.

“Don’t meddle there, Sangoulème,” he replied almost savagely, dividing one of the perching-sticks with an energetic swoop of his pen-knife.

“It’s unwise to play with fire. I’m going to be

frank with you, even at the risk of offending you. If there is at this court a human being whom I despise with all my heart, it is the Nievendloh: she is false, malicious, intriguing to the core, and when she appeals to Heaven it is with a prayer like this: 'Dear Lord, provide me with a husband as quickly as possible, and let all the other young girls become old maids, Amen!' No, Norbert, rather than let this villanous dame capture a place in your heart I would wrap you in the white winding-sheet, and consign you tenderly to a grave in the deep waters of our beloved sea."

Leopold paused and stared into the young seaman's amused face; then he laughed aloud "Do you know, Norbert, this reminds me of an episode in the life of my great-uncle, and I am ready to duplicate it in Fräulein von Nievendloh's case. Shall I tell it to you?"

"Your Highness could not command a more devout audience!" said Sangoulème, and threw himself on the sofa, resting his head in his hand.

"My great-uncle, the Duke of A. . . . was a very jolly and fun-loving gentleman," began the Prince, industriously whittling away at his wooden perches. "Several unsuccessful intrigues that had

revealed the name of the schemer caused him to conceive a violent hatred for Countess H. . . . a young Lady-in-waiting, and the originator of the same. Just such an affair as this one between you and the Nievendloh was on the tapis then. The Countess was busily laying her snares for a young officer, to whom my great-uncle was warmly attached, and whom he felt called upon to save from a possible entanglement with this woman. A ball was to be given in the palace, as on this evening, and it was the intention of the Countess to bag the game on that occasion, for the unhappy victim was about to start on a long journey, just like you, cher Baron. There was nothing to do but to keep the Countess away at all hazards. My great-uncle who was as shrewd as he was inexorable, consoled himself with the thought that the end justified the means, and devised a plan which proved both original and effective. Sedan-chairs were in use at that time, and the Countess had ordered one of these functionaries for her trip to the palace that night. She was attired in a costly, elegant robe, when she entered the conveyance, and the chair with the two carriers began to move. But there came a sudden creaking, and then a crash, and—the bottom of the

sedan fell out. The Countess uttered a wild shriek, as she found herself wading in a sea of mud with no other protection to her little feet but a pair of white satin slippers. As if by signal the two carriers hurried on, and the Countess, almost swearing with despair, was compelled, willy-nilly, to run through the dreadful slush until the palace-gates were reached. Her magnificent brocaded train dragged behind her—she herself sank knee-deep in the deepest mud-holes, for there was no possible escape from her narrow run-away prison. My great-uncle won his case ; the missing bottom of the sedan, which had been sawed out by his orders, prevented much misfortune, as was afterwards demonstrated by the marriage which the handsome woman contracted with another fellow. But cruel as this involuntary foot-race on the part of the whilom Lady-in-waiting may seem to you, I am ready to saw out the bottom of the coupé in which the Nievendloh drives to the court-ball."

Leopold arose and shook the shavings from his clothes. He was still laughing, and Norbert joined him heartily.

"And now, Sangoulème, you will perceive the moral of my story. Your hand upon it, that you

will do nothing foolish, no matter how enchanting the temptress may appear this evening!" Leopold held out his hand, and Norbert shook it with a cordial clasp.

"Your Highness need have no anxiety on my account," said he. Profound despair was in his voice. "Fräulein Alice will be no more dangerous to me than any other society belle that may cross my path on this or any other day of my life. Human hearts are like the buds of spring: thousands develop in the brilliant sunlight—thousands are destroyed by the black frost. My life knows naught of sunshine; gales and tempests were my cradle-songs in youth!"

The Prince stared gravely at the floor before him; deep furrows seamed his brow. "Let the storm spend its fury, and what it carries in its wake will be the spring of happiness. I can turn your life into pleasant channels, Sangoulème—but no earthly power can govern your heart, except some noble woman's love. And now, I'm off to see Aunt Josephine for a moment. Will you come with me, or have you already disposed of your time otherwise? I see that you are dressed to go out."

"I intended to take a stroll through the park,"

replied Norbert, confirming the Prince's supposition. "The drifting snow is very enticing, although the warm atmosphere has made the roads almost impassable. Voyons, I'll encroach upon the business of the pathfinder!"





XI.

"Upon my strand the loveliest flowers their blooms unfold."

THE members of the ducal house had just entered the ball-room. Hundreds of dazzling lights illuminated the modish scene, thronged by the well-dressed multitude. It was a constantly shifting view of exquisite beauty.

A buzz of laughing voices charged the perfumed air, drowned now and then by the strains of the orchestra, stationed behind luxuriant pyramids of hot-house plants. The oldest guests were grouped around the sets of the dancers, attired in glittering uniforms, adorned with orders, the dowagers in satins and diamonds—the whole a highly-colored, sparkling life-mosaic. Prince Leopold led Ruth von Altingen in the mazurka. They made a handsome couple that attracted every eye. The young Prince danced with shining eyes and

proudly lifted head, and Erl Queen nestled in his arm like a little white dove, slim and gleaming in array silver sheen.

Countess Lersneck raised her gold eye-glass to her eyes, and smiled complaisantly on her young charming charge. Enormous turquoises rocked contentedly on her bare white neck, and her fat face glowed with serene admiration.

Sangoulème had dropped into one of the yellow satin easy-chairs that lined the walls, and watched the gay scene interestingly.

"Folk, all, who have drawn prizes from the urn of destiny!" ran through his thoughts. Before him arose the quiet park of Altingen, with all its fondly-dreamed delight, and all its unexpected anguish. He thought of the Prince who had gone forth to meet Love, and his eyes involuntarily followed Ruth's lovely form. But she had no eyes for such silent messengers: she was very much in demand, the young men fairly laid siege to her dancing-card.

A hand suddenly dropped on Norbert's shoulder.

"Not dancing, Sangoulème?" asked Prince Leopold in his gayest humor, and dropped into the seat beside him. "Are you blasé or lazy, or afraid to cope with some of these midsummer

strategists? Come with me—no lying at anchor on such an evening!”

“My programme bears three names already; the next walse will prove my predilection for the dance.”

“By Jove! Who is the lucky damsel?”

“Countess Sternow.”

Leopold smiled softly. “And next comes Fräulein von Sanden, eh? What a conscientious fellow you are, friend Sangoulème! You stare death straight in the face, and arrange your programme according to the antediluvianism of the ladies, eh?”

“It matters not whom I select to do my duty by.”

“And Alice?”

“Fräulein von Nievendloh has granted me the second dance.”

“Of course—*bien apropos*, ‘the lovers’ dance’!”

The Prince turned his head, and followed the graceful movements of the lithe little Lady-in-waiting. “Have you engaged Fräulein von Altingen? I hope you will be my vis-à-vis in the next quadrille. The Duchess is to be my partner, and it is very appropriate that we make a set of our own. Yonder goes the Erl Queen looking

—like a snow-flake threading this clumsy stress of colors—a simple, charming riddle in a shallow dull charade without a back-ground! You'll dance the next quadrille with her, won't you?"

"No, Your Highness," replied Norbert, with calm decision. "I have not yet engaged Fräulein von Altingen, and feel quite sure that she has not one dance to give away at such a time of night."

"Thunder and lightning!—Is the end of the world coming?" cried the Prince excitedly. "There he goes and dances with the Sternow and the Sanden, and waits until Erl Queen has disposed of every dance! Our tastes have always differed vastly, but to-night you make me doubt that you have any taste at all, old fellow! Come with me—at once: and try your luck—at any rate!" The Prince sprang to his feet, and thrust his arm through that of the young naval officer.

"Your Highness," interposed Norbert, earnestly endeavoring to restrain his princely friend, "I do not care to be refused!"

"You have more than deserved it by this time!" laughed Leopold. "Come, follow me!"

Ruth was engaged in a lively conversation with a young civil officer, when the two gentlemen approached her. The delicate folds of her gown

fell in soft, silvery pleats around her graceful figure, ending in a tissue train, which rippled over the waxed floor like a glistening stripe of water. A narrow band of gold confined the soft coils of her hair, in which nestled a magnificent star of diamonds—an heirloom from Ruth's mother, which the young girl was wearing for the first time to-night, in order to keep from marring by a single trait of color the snowy elegance of her attire.

Ruth looked frightened, when the Prince in playful earnest asked her for a dance for his tardy friend, de Sangoulème. A crimson blush suffused her cheeks, as she pointed slowly to her programme. "I am exceedingly sorry, Your Highness, but as you see, I am engaged for every dance."

Norbert bowed in silence and withdrew. He intended to have uttered a polite phrase, but his dry throat seemed constricted. Before his eyes flitted a faded rose, which he had seen on the desk of the Prince. He left it to his royal friend to overwhelm the young lady with reproaches.

"Don't be offended, my dear Fräulein von Altingen, but you should have saved a dance for my particular crony, under any circum-

stances !” exclaimed Leopold, closing his argument. Ruth looked at him with a singular smile.

“It would have been a risky thing to do, Your Highness,” she replied in a voice loud enough for Norbert to hear, “for it is more than possible the dance would never have been claimed.”

Herr von Meisenbach bowed his way on tip-toe past the army of trains, and greeted the young seaman with effusion, so that Norbert soon found himself separated from the little group.

Fräulein von Nievendloh was enjoying one of her *beaux jours*. She was gracefully leaning back in an easy-chair ; her fan archly lifted to her eyebrows as she scanned Sangoulème’s face with a passionate look. Soft clouds of Nile-green silk draped her well-developed form, dotted profusely with lace butterflies and satin ribbons, and garnished with white roses, flowers that also nestled in her jetty hair. There was an air of love-lorn sentimentality in her attire that harmonized well with the sensuous lips, now half parted and revealing noteworthily pearly teeth.

“Believe me, cher Baron,” said she in a subdued voice, and bending close to Norbert to counter-drown the strains of the music, “people are dreadfully narrow-minded here, so far as

prejudice is concerned. I have already told you, a stranger need only be here a few days when half the town knows more about his business than he does himself—and if the chronique scandaleuse finds the merest flaw in his pedigree the aristocracy, *en bloc*, turns up its dainty nose, and draws its black pencil through the name of the unhappy victim!”

“How terrible!” smiled Norbert absently. “I hope there are not *many* such unfortunates!”

“There is never any lack of them, even to this latter day!” Alice emphasized her every word, knitting her pretty brow. It aroused her indignation that her partner seemed to be engaged in watching Fräulein von Altingen, almost continually, as she sat with Lieutenant von Otthardt, engaged in lively conversation.

“Not even to this latter day?” for the first time Sangoulème’s eyes were directed to the pretty woman by his side. “Who is the victim now, Fräulein von Nievendloh? Will you tell me, unless you think me indiscreet?”

Alice raised herself to her full height. “Yourself!” she gasped with short-drawn breath.

“I?” Norbert laughed. “It is too much honor to imagine that people occupy themselves

with my insignificant personage. Pray, what are the monstrosities attributed to the name of 'Sangoulème'?"

Fräulein von Nievendloh opened her fan hesitatingly. "I fear to offend you by telling you," said she, shifting the ivory slips slowly backward and forward. "It is a thankless piece of business to acquaint a man with the adverse opinions of his fellow-creatures. Your rancor might be turned on *me*, and, oh, I could never bear *that*!"

A very eloquent glance flashed from behind the dainty fan.

"Do not be troubled about that, Fräulein von Nievendloh. Even the most cruel censure would appear mild and friendly from such beautiful lips; my nerves are good—I am prepared to hear the worst!" Again he smiled, and his eyes sought the girlish form of the Erl Queen as it floated gracefully by in the mazes of the dance.

"I will tell you then: First of all an attempt has been made to smirch your family pedigree with the statement that your mother was a governess," began Alice, narrowly watching the operation of her words, "most ridiculous reproach, betraying a narrowness of mind which is repulsive

to me. Oh, I did not hesitate to give Fräulein von Altingen a really severe reprimand, and was inexpressibly glad of the opportunity to be able to defend you with all the eloquence at my command. Whether your mother was a governess or a Duchess is a matter of sublime indifference. Your father loved her, and by his love raised her to the sphere of pure romance and poetry. Happy the woman who possesses the love of a Sangoulème ! ”

Norbert did not observe the expression of languishing *abandon* in the eyes of the Nievendloh. His own were dim with unshed tears, as he gazed wildly at the steady lights of the chandelier. They seemed to flit like a blurred mass before him, commingled with the apish glint of will-o'-the-wisps, dissolving at last into a pale aureole, which the fever that throbbed in his temples translated to the golden gleam of Ruth's hair.

“ So it is to Baroness Altingen that the capital is indebted for this interesting scrap of tattle,” asked he calmly, whistling the sullen words between his teeth so that they were scarcely audible.

“ Certainly ; the Erl Queen is a very despotic young person, who tries to drag into the dust all

who attempt to spring up beside her!" A venomous pucker hung on the young woman's lips, as cruel as the furtive side-glance she bestowed on the sweet maiden she had just maligned. "Herr von Otthardt alone seems to be an exception to the rule, and the only one who has found favor in her eyes. How confidingly she chats with him! The handsome Uhlan need but endorse his admiration with passion-kisses on her hand? Why should he not? I am informed that Fräulein Ruth is very fond of the sea, and her wedding-trip with the irresistible Otthardt may take her, for a time, to the United States." Alice threw herself back, and laughed sarcastically, a laugh that cut like a new knife into the heart of the young seaman.

"Poor Ruth!" continued Alice in subtle soliloquy. "She will neither be happy herself nor allow others. She is as chaste as ice! She has no animation. Woman's tender devotion and ardent unselfishness are strangers to her heart, which will never be filled with the burning passion that ennobles love and makes it strong to defy the dictates of the world where the man of one's choice is concerned. She could never banish from her mind the memory of the 'gov-

erness,' and would permit it to wreck her happiness rather than make her pride the servant of her heart. What is the matter, M. de Sangou-lème? You look dreadfully pale! Ah, you see, I have offended you, after all, by my frankness, while I only wanted to assure you how entirely I am upon your side!" Fräulein von Nievendloh leaned over Norbert and scanned his dark face with feverishly burning eyes. The absorbing character of her passion was expressed in every feature of her beautiful, sensuous face.

"Who could have the heart to be annoyed at you, my dear Fräulein von Nievendloh?" replied Norbert with a wan smile. His breath came thick and fast. "I value your friendship highly, and I thank you for your sincerity. Let the good people of the Residence shrug their shoulders about my noble, beloved mother! The world is hardly worth my hatred—and in parting from you I take with me the assurance that you do not share their narrow views!"

Norbert arose hastily, and bowed before Alice. "This dance will soon be ended—may I have the honor once again?"

Alice pressed her white, bare arm against the young man's sleeve. "Do not bear our Residence

so great a grudge that you will shun it for the future !” she whispered. “ True hearts are beating for you here. Hoping confidently to see you again !” Her pretty head dropped on her breast ; the white roses trembled against her snowy neck, and from the floating laces emerged a perfume that intoxicated the young man.

“ Yes, *au revoir !*” said he dreamily, and drew her with him into the merry whirlpool of the dancers.

Norbert had taken leave of Alice and stood among the surging crowd, vainly endeavoring to find an outlet by which he might escape. Leaning against a marble column close beside him stood two young infantry officers.

“ How very ridiculous, Babendorf !” said one, a man strikingly tall and well-built, with curly hair and the shadow of a coming mustache on his upper lip, “ why shouldn’t we visit these people ? It’s true, the old man was a horse-dealer and is a converted Hebrew, who began his career in a very small way ; but now he is a man of affairs, rich as Croesus, the dispenser of elegant hospitality, with two daughters, to boot, that are quite passable.”

“ A Hebrew ! a Hebrew !” replied Herr von

Babendorf, speaking through his nose, and raising himself on tip-toe to make his squatty figure appear taller. "All he cares for is to have our scarlet collars decorate his salons, and *I* am of opinion that we are merely throwing ourselves away !"

Lieutenant von Frisch twisted and tugged the recalcitrant fibres of his future mustache. "Let me tell you, cher ami," laughed he arrogantly, "a young army officer must go wherever the kitchen-chimney smokes, hither or thither. Is Colonel Rodeck, who was pensioned off long ago, any better than an ordinary chicken-dealer ? He sells his eggs and chickens at fabulous prices, the same as any Hebrew peddler, and yet we go there, and do not fail to enjoy what he sets before us !"

Sangoulème made a desperate effort to pass by them. Disgust and bitterness choked his heart : the Residence and all its people had begun to be the objects of his profound contempt.

Again his progress was arrested by the long line of chaperons that sat around the walls.

"How shockingly conspicuous ! What a dreadfully extravagant toilet !" hissed a corpulent excellency into her neighbor's ear. "She is bound to outdo everybody ! She must have everything

about her odd and unique, of course, to catch the men ! ”

“ She can afford to appear in almost anything, my dear Frau General ! ” seconded the other eagerly. “ She has her ducat-bags behind her, and the world shuts its eyes. Now, if one of our daughters conducted herself one-half so brazenly, great heavens . . . ”

“ How comes it, that Altingen belongs to her—while her father is still alive ? ”

“ For a very simple reason, my dear. The Baron married the wealthy Countess von Saaleck-Hardenberg, the whilom Lady-in-waiting of the Princess Josephine. She bought Altingen, which was heavily mortgaged, and thus acquired its ownership. At her death Ruth, of course, inherited the property.”

The scented air seemed suffocating to the sailor. With hurried strides almost impolite in the narrow confines of a ball-room, he wound his way past the chairs and the critical eye-glasses of the mammas, dashed through the adjoining apartments and disappeared in the winter-garden.

A soft, tropical atmosphere surrounded him ; there were groups of palms whose proud tops grazed the arched glass-roof of the hot-house, and

ferns, camellias and orchids abounded in rank growth. Snug grottos with small, moss-covered benches were distributed all round the beautiful place.

Norbert sauntered through the winding walks, and discovered a secluded retreat under the thick, overhanging branches of laurel and oleander. Tired and sick unto death, he threw himself upon the bench, rested his head in his hand, and traced with his eyes the trellised ivy-vines that climbed over the artificial rocks of the grotto.

"Bitterness and pride have driven even the Erl Queen to calumniate me," groaned Norbert bitterly. "So deep has the venom of her surroundings sunk into her pure and girlish heart, as to make her innocent face a mask of rank hypocrisy. Oh, had I but never known thee, and the dreamy, golden days, when I first met thee ! Better, far better that I had sank without thee, in the deep, before thou camest to destroy the lovely image that filled my youthful thoughts."

White orange-blossoms stifled him with their fragrant breath ; a misty veil spread over his eyes. He lingered immovably on the spot, he laid his head back, and softest strains of music from the ball-room lulled him to drowsiness.

Quick, soft foot-steps suddenly drew near accompanied by the *frou-frou* of a woman's dress.

"And what is the secret you are going to impart to me, Baroness?" asked a man's deep voice subdued to a most confidential whisper. "You asked me to conduct you to this lonely winter-garden, and I obeyed a command that makes me one of the happiest of men, with the burning desire that you may have much, a great deal to tell me!"

Norbert raised his head. Through the bosky shrubbery he outlined a girl's white form—it was Ruth, and before her stood, in the glittering uniform of the Uhlans——

"That I have, Herr von Otthardt," replied Erl Queen with composure, "for the present that I have to give you must decide your destiny. Here, take this! It may be indiscreet for me to meddle with your affairs in this manner, but among good friends sincerity is our first obligation. I am acquainted with your position; I know that notes not yet cancelled will make it impossible for you to serve longer in the army: and therefore I am glad to be able to restore to the service of king and fatherland an officer who could but ill be spared. The contents of this package will be

sufficient to bring about a favorable change in your affairs."

"Baroness Altingen—I am at a loss——" stammered the handsome young man. Paper was heard to rustle, a torn envelope fell to the ground, and with a quick cry of surprise Herr von Otthardt stepped backward.

"Good heavens, so large a sum!" exclaimed he hoarsely. "What does it mean, Baroness? What does this money mean—how come you to——"

"I have told you, Herr von Otthardt, for what purpose it has been given to you," said Ruth hurriedly, "and now, do me the favor to say not another word upon the subject."

"Ask *anything* of me, save that!" cried Otthardt wildly. "Say to a condemned felon: 'I cut the rope from around your neck and give you back your life—but do not ask me why!' Or hand a famished wanderer a costly draught and add: 'Ask not from whom it comes!' Do you think, Fräulein von Altingen, that you would be obeyed? Never! You lay in my hands a fortune—and ask that I shall not demand the name of the kind fairy who empties her horn of plenty in my lap. No, Baroness, I shall not let you go from

me without revealing the giver's name. Is it *Ruth?*" He caught the girl's hand and clasped it convulsively within his own.

Black shadows flitted before Norbert's dazed eyes.

"The money comes from me, of course," replied Erl Queen coldly, vainly endeavoring to withdraw her hand. "I do not desire your thanks. Please, conduct me to the ball-room—I demand it!"

"Again I must deny your request, adorable Ruth!" cried the Lieutenant passionately. "How can you expect me to lead you back among those people now, when I am ready to idolize a seclusion that has permitted me to wholly solve earth's sweetest mystery. You lay in my hands a fortune, to save me from ruin—to allow me to retain my place in the world and the army, and would you have me believe that you do not desire my gratitude? Ruth, a woman does not save a man unless she loves him; and although I am overpowered by this sudden revelation of good fortune, although your whole demeanor and intercourse with me have never betrayed a spark of that feeling, your present action dispels all further doubts. Yes, Ruth, you love me!" He pressed

her hands to his breast, and covered them with burning kisses.

"Herr von Otthardt!" It was with a cry of utter indignation that Ruth wrested her hands from his grasp. Her face was deathly pale, her lips twitched painfully. She threw her head back with infinite disdain, and measured him with eyes that flamed with scorn.

"Discontinue this audacity, Herr von Otthardt," said the girl icily, recoiling another step. "I regret more than I can tell the deplorable misunderstanding which has aroused in your heart such suppositions. I do not love you any more tonight than on any other day of my life!"

"No, Ruth—do not deceive yourself. No woman would make such a sacrifice out of mere compassion. Pity does not throw away a fortune like the one you have just placed in my hands. I understand—I honor your reserve, but I do not believe in it so long as these banknotes are left to burn my fingers!" He spoke with passionate vehemence, while his dark eyes were even more eloquent than his words. Again he drew near the trembling girl. "Ruth," continued he, "I never believed it possible that I could awaken tender sentiments in your heart, and I have never tried,

lest a calumnious world might misinterpret my interest in you. Let me be frank and honest, Ruth, for it is my duty ! Until now your manner has never betrayed more than a passing and polite indifference, which was the natural bar to any dream of idle flirtation. You have removed the obstacle with your own hands, and dropped the veil which has so wonderfully hidden the darling mystery of your soul. All this is an enigma, which I should be unable to fathom save for the solution in my hand ! Do not deny your true feeling for me, Ruth ! Each one of these crisp notes gives the lie to your words, and proves the contrary with crushing vehemence."

The lady of Altingen stood before the Lieutenant with her hands convulsively clasped. Her pale lips quivered at the conflict raging in her breast.

"Herr von Otthardt," gasped Ruth at last, "there is a mistake, and, although it is against my solemn promise, I am compelled to enlighten you for the sake of both of us ! This money does not come from me. I was but commissioned to place it in your hands." A deep breath wrung itself from Ruth's breast, and her white arms sank feebly by her side,

"*Not from you?*" Like one who has been stabbed, the handsome officer recoiled from her. "From whom is it, then, pray?"

"Spare me the name."

"Never! Do not insult me!" Infinite excitement resounded in his tones, and he continued, almost savagely: "Who dares to force me into such a strained position? Speak, Fräulein von Altingen, unless you wish me to think your statement but a subterfuge."

Ruth looked at him with flashing eyes. "The money comes, then, from Her Highness, the Princess Josephine," replied she coldly.

"From the Princess?" Profound consternation spread over the Lieutenant's face. "How comes Her Highness to know of my position? The name of 'Otthardt' is never mentioned in her presence."

"I made her acquainted with it."

"You?—you, Ruth? Then, after all, you were the good angel that watched over my destiny?" he cried madly, pressing his hands to his quick-beating heart. "Instead of explaining an error, you betray to me another sweet secret, Ruth—I implore you——"

"Ah, good evening, Fräulein von Altingen, I

have been looking for you everywhere !” As if he had risen from the earth, Prince Leopold stood suddenly before Ruth, and offered her his arm. “I have come to ask for an extra turn, Baroness, and hope that Herr von Otthardt will not object ! With your permission, Baron !” A look of withering scorn flashed on the young officer. Catching Ruth’s hand with a swift motion, the Prince drew it through his arm and led her quietly past the cool fragrant bowers back into the ball-room.

“I came just in time, I presume,” muttered he, through his teeth, “it was careless on your part, to say the least, to follow an Otthardt into the winter-garden. Do you not know of the curse that rests on the vows made in the orange-grotto by a bearer of that name ?”

“Is it fair to make the son suffer for the sins of the father ?” asked Erl Queen reproachfully. “Your Highness judges rather harshly !”

“But justly.” The voice of the Prince sounded ominous, foreboding a storm : and Ruth recognized at this moment in his usually laughing eyes the unbending, iron will of the future sovereign. He pressed the girl’s arm almost violently, and for the first time in her life Ruth trembled under

the influence of the man who walked by her side.

Norbert lingered quietly under the blooming branches, and stared absent-mindedly at the graceful, fan-like tops of the tall palm-trees.

"She does not love him!" said he to himself, "more than any other, more than *me!*" His head leaned heavily on his hand, and his eyes closed, as if they were tired of looking on life's fitful changes.

In the ball-room they danced the Française. Herr von Otthardt was Ruth's vis-à-vis. "We were interrupted a moment ago, Baroness," whispered he excitedly, "I beseech you by all that is sacred to you, procure me an audience with the Princess! I have matters of the utmost importance to communicate to her!" Erl Queen acquiesced in silence; she felt the watchful eyes of the Prince upon her, as he stood by the Duchess' chair, ostensibly but an onlooker.

Countess Lersneck had gone in quest of her much admired *protégée*, and whispered tender words of commendation in Ruth's ear, before joining the Prime-Minister's wife, to whom she had much entertaining scandal to impart. A lackey made his way through the crowded room, and

stopped with a profound courtesy before Fräulein von Altingen, to whom he presented a little note with a few whispered words.

"Dearest Baroness," read Ruth behind her fan, scarcely able to decipher the scribbled words, "forgive me for my boldness in troubling you with these few lines. Her Highness, the Princess, is lying in a fever of excitement, which I cannot understand. She incessantly calls for you, and talks in a strange, confused way. I am greatly worried about her. Knowing you to be in the castle, dearest Baroness, I make bold to express the earnest wish that you will come, if for a moment only, to Her Highness.

"In great haste,

"Your obedient servant,

"CLARA BÜSSEL."

Ruth folded the scrap of paper and placed it in the bosom of her dress. She glanced hurriedly across the ball-room; there was the momentary lull that usually precedes the announcement of supper. Resolving quickly how to proceed, she turned toward the exit, but unfortunately there stood Prince Leopold, keeping a watchful eye on the door—what should she do? Ruth was familiar with the arrangement of the rooms at the castle. A labyrinth of corridors and stair-ways led from the winter-garden to the wing of the

palace inhabited by the Princess. It was not a pleasant route to take at night ; more especially for a young girl, familiar with the ghostly legend of the "white lady." But what mattered that, so long as speed was Ruth's chief aim? The girl pursued her way through the ball-room without further hindrance, and reached the winter-garden, passing hurriedly through its bowers and shady walks. There, in front of her, was the door, which opened on the little back stair-way. She pressed her hand on the latch, the door opened noiselessly. A blast of cold air greeted her ; a small hall-lamp threw a dim light over the warm heated stair-way. All was silent as the grave. Ruth shivered, and remembered that she was without a shawl—but to return was out of the question. It would delay her beyond discretion ; besides this, Prince Leopold stood near the exit through which the dressing rooms were reached. The Erl Queen clenched her teeth and walked on bravely. No sound was heard anywhere ; only the long train of her white silk gown rustled over the floor, and the broad gold bracelets round her wrists clattered softly as she moved along.

Ruth was suddenly assailed by a feeling of horror ; she paused and clutched her throbbing

heart. A long, narrow corridor stretched away dim and dwindling before her, intersected here and there by richly carved doors of heavy oak, which time had painted of a deep rust-brown. The jambs were covered with black dust and cob-webs. Wood-fretters were tapping busily away in the worm-eaten panels, and from the recess of a broken window came the monotonous flapping back and forth of a heavy damask curtain with which the breeze was playing. How ghastly it all sounded in this sepulchral quiet! Ruth moved slowly onward; above her on a wall hung an old painting, "the rising of Lazarus from the dead." The faces on the canvas were sharply outlined, and in the dim light the sallow countenances looked almost as if they were alive. There, that form in the long winding-sheet is stepping from the frame. It stretches its bony arms to embrace her—the dark eyes follow her as she passes by! Erl Queen has turned her face aside. She, who never knew fear, who was wont to traverse her ancestral halls of Altingen at any hour of the day or night, and linger in the lonely clover-dell till midnight—now felt the ice-drops of fear beading her tense forehead. Summoning her utmost will-power she walked briskly on.

The girl was greatly excited, and had been made more nervous by her encounter with Otthardt in the winter-garden. From the tower outside the clock struck the solemn hour of twelve. Every stroke fell with a hammer's force on the heart of the trembling Erl Queen. Her feet seemed made of lead, and before her eyes danced the form of Lazarus in the long white trailing sheet,—this must be the corridor haunted by the 'white lady'! Footsteps in the distance—distinctly audible, and drawing nearer and nearer. In another moment she will be face to face with a ghost! Ruth clutches the door-post by her side, her eyes are raised to the ceiling, that echoes with the approaching foot-falls. Now, there the specter comes, gaunt and dim and glittering. With a cry of agonizing horror Ruth falls upon her knees, her white hands raised as though to avert the approaching spirit-form, her shuddering face buried in her arms. Wrapped in the silvery clouds of her gown Ruth kneeled immovably beside the dark-brown door.

"Great heavens, Fräulein von Altingen!" It is a familiar voice, that greets Ruth's ear—fearful, but full of secret joy. The footsteps come hastily onward: two arms are thrown around her,

and she feels herself tenderly raised from the floor. "What on earth brings *you* hither at this hour of the night?"

Erl Queen has opened her eyes; before her stands de Sangoulème, supporting still her trembling frame. His earnest eyes are bent in question on her.

"Oh, you, 'twas you then!" cries the girl gladly. "I thank you, M. de Sangoulème! I was a very silly child, and, thinking of old ghosts, was overcome by fear. Laugh at me, M. de Sangoulème, for I deserve it!"

"But, what are you doing here?" asked Norbert, almost brusquely.

Ruth had regained her wonted composure, and drew from her pocket the scrap of paper, which she handed the young man.

"Read!" said she, without raising her eyes.

Norbert read the contents of the brief note, and returned it to the girl.

"I see more clearly now," he replied, with evident relief, "but I am still at a loss to understand, why you should have chosen this out-of-the-way corridor?"

"I had no other choice. The Prince was watching the entrance to the ball-room, and as I

desired to escape unnoticed, I thought of this dark lonely way." A shudder passed through her frame, and her little teeth chattered audibly. Norbert looked quickly at her.

"You are without a shawl!" said he sternly, and, tearing the cloak from his shoulders, presented it to her. "How very careless, Baroness! Here, take this mantle!"

A burning red suffused the Erl Queen's cheeks; the old obstinacy returned, and she pressed her lips tightly together, as she remembered the despised sailor's blouse of long ago. "I thank you!" said she coldly, "but I am warm enough!"

For a moment it seemed to Norbert as if he must hurl the cloak at her feet, and turn his back forever on that haughty, lovely face. But better judgment gained the victory.

"Do not be childish," said he coldly, "and transfer your contempt to things that cannot help the misfortune of being my poor property. Take this cloak instantly; it *is* cold!" Without awaiting her reply, he wound the garment around her shoulders. "Come, your arrival is undoubtedly awaited with anxiety by the Princess!"

Ruth obeyed like a timid, frightened child.

His commanding tone was new to her, but she liked it, nevertheless. It matched his stately bearing well.

"Do you mean to go with me?" asked Ruth with a weak attempt at provocation. "It is not at all necessary. I am not afraid any longer!"

"I will accompany you!" The tone of his voice brooked no further objection, yet the girl stopped in her walk and looked up at his face.

"I am detaining you!"

"Not so."

He did not condescend to look at her, but walked in silence beside her. Erl Queen now drew the dark cloak closely around her chilly shoulders. The heavy folds nestled cosily around her slender throat and arms, surprised at the blooming beauty they were privileged to shield, forgetful of the long dread nights during which the tempest had scattered the snowy froth-flowers over its protecting folds. Ruth's heart beat wildly, as she thought of the adventures at which this silent garment had been present. Her hands passed tenderly over the smooth cloth, as she settled herself in its thick pleats as snugly as a bird, which after wet and weary wandering flies back at last to the soft nest.

Up stairs and down they tramped, through innumerable corridors and narrow passages. Neither spoke a word; only once an obtrusive nail caught Erl Queen's silvery train; but Norbert quickly stooped and liberated the silken seam.

"Thank you, M. de Sangoulème. The floor is old and treacherous!"

Ruth waited for an answer, but as the young naval officer persisted in his silence, she continued hesitatingly: "How comes it we met so strangely in these isolated corridors? Not a human being beside ourselves is near, and in this direction lie only the apartments of the Princess."

A furtive glance scanned the speaker's face. "I was impelled by the same desire as yourself to leave the ball-room unobserved," replied Norbert coldly. "Prince Leopold, at my urgent request, dismissed me, and one of the attendants brought me my sword and mantle, and pointed out a door, if I wished to reach the Prince's rooms the shortest way. I found the little door in the winter-garden, and did not think that I would lose my road. But no Ariadne was near to provide me with the rescuing clue, and I was utterly unable to grope my way through the labyrinth. I was on the point of retracing my steps to the ball-

room, when I met you in the long corridor, unfortunately unprepared for such a meeting."

"Here, to the right, and through this door, M. de Sangoulème! I am at the end of my long journey, and thank you very much for your cloak and escort. I hope I have not detained you very long!"

Fräulein von Altingen endeavored to unfasten the clasp of the mantle, tugging with restless fingers at the hook. It was a difficult task, for the bronze clasps had become entangled in the golden tendrils that hung around the girl's throat, and defied every effort to release them from their silken bonds.

"Allow me to try my fortune, Fräulein von Altingen!" said Norbert, offering his aid with beating heart. Ruth raised her rosy chin without hesitation to assist him in the undertaking.

For a moment the young man's hand grazed the warm white velvet of her neck; a stream of fire thrilled his veins and drove a throbbing glow to his strained temples, but not a muscle twitched in his grave countenance.

"Will it *never* come undone?" cried the mistress of Altingen, and drew her rounded chin aside. "Spare yourself the trouble, M. de San-

goulème, I'll sacrifice the curl, or I shall not be back in the ball-room before one o'clock," and with a quick, strong pull Ruth snatched the cloak from her shoulders and returned it to its owner. "Again, my heartfelt thanks. I hope I have not demolished one of your clasps!" She smiled and pulled the bell-rope by the side of the door. Foot-steps were heard within.

Norbert threw the cloak over his arm. "Will you let Hoveland escort you back?" asked he coldly.

"I think so, yes!"

"Good evening, Baroness!" He left her and returned slowly to the dark vestibule.

A door was softly opened, whispered words were exchanged, and the white form of the Erl Queen disappeared behind the creaking oak-panels.

Norbert retreated to the recess of a window. It was barely possible that Hoveland was not at hand, and in that case Erl Queen would have to return alone. At any rate it was safer for him to wait for her. The moon emerged from behind the clouds, and thrust a frightened ray through the round glass-pane. It fell transversely over the cloak on Sangoulème's arm. The young

man's eyes followed the narrow strip of light, and discovered a tiny bunch of golden threads in the top-most clasp.

Norbert pressed the yellow curl passionately to his lips, disentangled it from the massive clasp and hid it in the portfolio he carried in his breast. "God knows how dearly I love my fair-haired maid!" murmured the young man softly, pressed his forehead against the icy window-pane to cool his fevered brain, and waited patiently.

The dark-green satin curtains that screened the tester-bed of the Princess Josephine were withdrawn. Through the amber shade of a hanging-lamp a mellow light poured soft tints over the gleaming form of the Erl Queen, as she knelt by the side of the couch, like some good little fairy. The Princess sat propped up in bed. She stroked Ruth's silken hair with feverish tenderness, again and again, keeping time with the softly whispered words that fell from the lips of the Erl Queen.

"Tell me all, dear child, keep nothing from me, I must know everything! Ah, the ice has melted at last, ice that had enchained my heart these many years. Light and warmth are throbbing in my heart; I can hear the lark's joyous tune and

see the sunlight, while out of doors it is midnight, and winter reigns supreme. You told him, Ruth, that the money came from me? That was wrong. And yet it makes me glad, as nothing has for many years rejoiced me in this barren, gloomy life. But why did you betray my secret, child? Did he guess it?"

Josephine clasped the girl's hands and looked with eager eyes into her face, breathless to hear the answer.

"No, Your Highness. Unfortunately, I was forced to tell him the truth in regard to the generous donor," whispered the Erl Queen, pressing a gentle kiss on the old lady's hand. "*I could* not pass it off as coming from me, because it would have caused much miserable error and confusion."

The Princess fell back on her pillows.

"What kind of error?" asked she wistfully.

"Herr von Otthardt believed himself beloved by me, Your Highness!"

Ruth's little head bent low over the satin counter-pane, and the slender hand now pressed against the bed-post trembled visibly.

"And is it not true?" cried Josephine in dismay. She raised herself, lifted the face of the young

girl and looked earnestly into her eyes. "I was firmly convinced that no other but the handsome Uhlan had won my darling's heart!"

"No, Your Highness, a thousand times *no*!" The words dropped from Erl Queen's lips in passionate confession. Ruth pressed one hand to her heaving breast. "I cannot love him—neither now nor ever! Here, in my heart, there lives the image of one who has become the idol of my life, and to him I cling, with all the ardor and tenderness of my soul! I had no idea that it was thus with me! To-night, when Lieutenant Otthardt spoke to me of love, when I stood at the turning-point in my life and saw the abyss that yawned before me to devour the happiness of my life, the scales fell from my eyes, and I knew, in the twinkling of an eye, where I must seek my salvation. I knew that my heart was no longer free, **and** that in spite of all my defiance and resistance Love had crept stealthily within, there to abide to all eternity!"

For a moment deep silence reigned in the midnight chamber. Then Josephine opened her arms to the lovely speaker, and Ruth, with a soft cry of delight, sprang to her feet and nestled her head on the breast of her dear old friend.

Tears were in the eyes of both : the Princess' hands were clasped around the white throat of the Lady of Altingen, as if in silent prayer. "I am deeply grieved to have caused you so much embarrassment by my mistake, my darling !" whispered the Princess. "Forgive me, I meant well ! And now go back to song and dance, my little fairy ! Go to Otthardt—and tell him I await his coming. Bring him tomorrow, Ruth, at four o'clock. We shall be alone then. Alice goes to the church-concert. Farewell, my darling child. I am deeply grateful for your coming ; and believe, more than ever now, that every human being has his own good guardian angel."

The snowy form of the young girl disappeared behind the curtains like a transparent shadow. The Princess gazed wistfully after her, and her pale lips framed a tender prayer for the future welfare of this lovely girl. Her eyes wandered to the crucifix that hung suspended from the wall before her and wearily closed at last, while a smile of gentle content spread over the softly-wrinkled countenance.

Out in the vestibule Frau Rössel wrapped a warm shawl around Erl Queen's shoulders, and kissed her hand gratefully. "I am going with

you, Baroness," she said quietly. "Her Highness will not miss me for a little while."

The door was opened, and the two ladies stood in the moonlit corridor.

"Come, dear Frau Clara, let us go by yonder way which leads to the little door in the winter-garden!" begged Ruth softly. "We will make haste, and arrive as soon as by the main entrance."

"This way?" ventured the old lady in surprise. "How strange! How came your Grace by such a notion?"

"I love the way, Frau Clara!" whispered Ruth tenderly, "it, too, has its memories!" They turned quickly around the corner, and ere long their foot-steps had died away in the distance. From the deep shadows of the recess issued Norbert's tall form, his hand pressed to his heart.

"I love the way, Frau Clara!" murmured he to himself, over and over again, as if he dared not comprehend the meaning of these words. He sauntered slowly down the stone stairs. From afar came the strains of a fiery mazurka; bright flames danced gaily overhead, and busy lackeys flitted to and fro. But the young sailor had

neither eyes nor ears for human splendor. He passed as though in a sweet dream, and in his heart of hearts was room for nothing save the echo of the words: "I love the way, Frau Clara!"





XII.

“ My son, why hidest thou thy face so shy ? ”

“ So you have come to take irrevocable leave, de Sangoulème ? ” cried Prince Leopold with a frown on his brow. “ You have not been here a week, and I haven’t had you to myself for a moment, for during the first few days I was compelled to pass from one pair of arms to another to say *bonjour*. You will not stay ? Bent absolutely upon going . . . Eh ! . . . After all, I was a fool, that I did not use Fräulein Alice as the luscious bait to detain you a little longer ! Does your uncle expect you ? ”

“ Yes, Your Highness. I have definitely notified him of my home-coming, and I owe to my dear old grandmother the duty of cutting short my pleasant sojourn here, for there are only **twelve** weeks left of our furlough, Your Highness ! ”

Leopold shook his head gravely. "That's just what grieves me most at our parting, old friend," he replied with a sigh. "We will not see each other very soon again!"

"Your Highness!"

"My royal brother has emphatically protested against my return to Kiel, and does not desire, under any circumstances, that I should serve in the navy for the next two years. He has already taken steps to obtain a long leave for me—my hands are absolutely tied. Ah, Sangoulème, deuce take the world! My heart is sore to think that you, dear lads, should put to sea without me!"

Sangoulème bowed his head. "You, too, have duties to perform toward your brother and your country," said he gravely, after a pause. "It will be a lonely journey without you, Your Highness, as dismal and monotonous as lying in the shadow of the Residence."

"I'll see you, however, before next sailing-day, friend Sangoulème," cried the Prince vehemently, "for I must not be missing when the gallant *Nelson* lifts her proud pinions for another cruise. I'll write you; leave me your address! And now, come, I'll go a part of the way with you through town. I take it for granted that you are on ~~the~~

way to your cousin to say farewell. This suits me, too, for I find it desperately lonely in this gloomy den."

The Prince slammed the window and stowed away an old-fashioned air-gun. "Sheer *tedium vitæ* has driven me to shoot at stray curs and midnight cats," he continued with a merry laugh. "A reminiscence of my youthful days, and one of the only sports that amuses small and large children alike. Too bad, there is no market held in this place now; the market-people were for many years the target of my clay-bullets. I tell you, Sangoulème, old Father Meisenbach has lain on yonder sofa writhing with laughter, when things began to stir among the peasant-women outside. And oh! the tongue-lashing these women used to bestow on the invisible foe!" Leopold touched the bell and ordered his cloak and hat to be brought. After a brief pause, he turned to Norbert, and, swayed by a sudden impulse, extended both hands to him. "Once more, Sangoulème, stay with me! You know how dear you are to me, how well liked by my brother and sister-in-law, and I need hardly assure you that I shall miss you every hour in the day with your dear old pedantic face and reproachful glances; which have

more effect upon me than all the reason-preaching sermons of brotherly authority ! Promise me, at least, that you'll come back ; and go in Heaven's name, if you must, to see your family, but leave me the hope that I shall see you back here again !"

"Do not exact this promise from me, Your Highness ! It might be impossible for me to fulfil it !" cried Norbert with a look of keen regret in his honest eyes. "God knows how gladly I would remain with you. My affection and undying loyalty belong to you, although it is denied me to prove by swifter action my devotion to you ! On our lonely ship we belonged to each other, for there you needed me, Prince ! Here, at the Residence, a weird and fitful world crowds between us ! You bask in love and friendship ! You do not need me, and will hardly miss me ! Therefore, do not detain me longer ! I am a queer fellow ! My lonely ship, rocking on the breast of Ocean, is dearer far to me than the life of the gay world, in whose interests I have no part—whose ways I cannot fathom. Once back in my quiet forests, I shall be well again ! I yearn for their peace and quiet, and am anxious to go to work. The seaman must not carry his knowledge in his hands alone. The ladder that leads to fame is

composed of rungs of theoretic wisdom, too. *Au revoir!* On board the *Nelson*, Your Highness, swims the plank where honest friendship thrives!"

"You're wrong, Sangoulème, if you think that I do not need your friendship here," said the Prince gravely. "It is just here where an honest friend is worth his weight in gold. I stand in need of faithful hearts as do all those whom destiny has placed on high. Truth seldom dares approach us. Sincerity comes clothed in the velvet cloak of flattery. Sangoulème, I cannot give you up—I cannot bear to have you leave me! But far be it from me to weld a chain for you out of my sympathy! Go, old fellow—and if it is possible, come back to me!"

"I promise, Your Highness. I will pledge you my word." The young man grasped the Prince's hand with warmth and firmness.

Leopold turned and snatched his cloak. "I'll go with you!"

Norbert came back to help him don his mantle, and as he did so his eyes fell accidentally on the writing-desk, the lid of which was partly open. A deathly pallor slowly overspread his face. There lay *his* rose—which Erl Queen had given away, stinging his pride to the quick. Jealous, furious

thoughts raged for a moment through his brain. With quick resolve he confronted the Prince, and fixed his eyes upon the latter's honest face.

"Prince," said he gloomily, "one question before we part, and a frank and open answer!"

"At all times, Sangoulème, ask what you please?"

"A few evenings ago you wore on your breast a rose, and told Fräulein von Nievendloh that it was the gift of a lady. Was it true, Your Highness, or only intending to mislead courtly curiosity?"

His eyes were riveted upon the open countenance of his friend; it seemed as if he must read the answer from the fresh truthful lips.

"The rose?" Leopold was quietly buttoning the coat over his breast. "It came from the Erl Queen. Didn't I tell you that? But it was a fib, of course, when I maintained she gave it to me. I simply intended to tease my friend, the Nievendloh, with the statement. Ah, me!" sighed the Prince, looking irresistibly comical in his feigned grief, "in all my life no lady has ever given me a rose, and even the little golden Ruth fought over it as desperately as though a dentist were approaching her! But I am wiser than I

look, and the more she prized the rose, the more determined was I to possess it. And the natural outcome of the affair was that I appropriated the rose on the strength of my future sovereignty, and I intend to have it pressed as a memento of my first independent action. There it lies in the drawer. Don't touch it, Sangoulème. Admire it with your eyes alone! Such things must be handled tenderly, per love alone : and as *you* have no use for that particular sentiment, the touch of your prosaic fingers would be sacrilege. Do you know, Sangoulème, I was immensely surprised that Ruth did not betray my falsehood? Had I been in her place, I would have made the future ruler of my country ridiculous by saying : 'Your Highness, I beg your pardon, but are you not dissembling.' Aunt Josephine could easily have revealed it all for the rose belonged to her. But why do you take such an interest in this affair? What do you mean by standing before me like a grand-inquisitor to ask about such trivial matters? Look out, dear friend, such an interest——"

"Is pardonable, Your Highness," interrupted Norbert, with half-suppressed glee. "The rose came indirectly from me, and the young lady's conduct seemed an affront aimed indirectly at me.

But, let it go. I am entirely reconciled, and even glad that this dear little bloom of contention will be immortalized in your portfolio! Just three o'clock!" Norbert snatched his cap hurriedly. "And old father sol has sent a few of his rays to illumine the park in your honor and mine! Let's profit by the favorable opportunity, Prince!"

"Ah, the rose came from you, *amico mio*?" said Leopold with a drawl. "And you were as mute as a cod-fish about the whole transaction? My compliments, Sangoulème: you are a genius! I would have wrung your neck had circumstances been reversed! And the Erl Queen? Still waters run deep! Is your icy heart at last drifting toward the equatorial regions of Love? My hand on it, Norbert, I do not begrudge you the little maid! Otthardt may look to his laurels. I'll intercept him every time!"

"Forward, my lad, and hoist the sails!" exclaimed the Prince, as he thrust his arm through his friend's, and led him away.

Norbert dashed in breathless haste up the thickly-carpeted stairway of the villa Olivia. The bronze figures on either side of the handsomely carved stair-case seemed to stare at him in sur-

prise. The crystal pendants tinkled in soft melodious vibrations at the firm tread of his feet. Three or four agile bounds brought him to the elaborately decorated entrance. Above the same, in a purple-lined niche, stood an artistic bust of some mythologic female deity. Norbert hesitated a moment before he gave the bell a vigorous pull.

Softly-shuffling foot-steps drew near ; old Lenz opened one of the heavy side-wings cautiously and welcomed Norbert with the greatest ceremony. "Ah, the Herr Lieutenant !" exclaimed he, with a cordial but respectful smile. "Please, come in !" He extended his feeble hands to aid Norbert in taking off his coat.

"Is my cousin at home, Lenz ?" asked he quickly. "Please announce me to her !"

"Fräulein Anna has just driven to town with Mademoiselle Marion to attend to some little commissions," said the old servant trustfully, "but they will be back ere long. Fräulein Anna said they would only see about the music that had been ordered."

"Ah, Ännchen is not in ? I am very sorry." And Norbert bit his lip irresolutely.

"The young Baroness is at home," continued

Lenz reassuringly. "She is in the reception-room just at present with Fräulein von Nievendloh, so Jean tells me, but the Herr Lieutenant need not hesitate to come in and wait for Fräulein Anna. I will announce you immediately."

"Lenz!" cried the young officer in alarm, detaining the old man with a swift gesture, "not a word to Fräulein von Altingen. It might disturb her. Conduct me to any room you please, where I can await my cousin's return."

"As the Herr Baron pleases!" The old servant hobbled diligently in advance of Norbert and opened the very first door to which they came. "Please, walk in!"

The door creaked softly on its hinges, the portières moved noiselessly aside, and resumed their rigid folds. Norbert found himself alone in a quiet apartment, filled with the fragrance of some unknown perfume. Voices could be heard in the adjoining room; one was that of the pretty Lady-in-waiting.

"It is incomprehensible, inexplicable, how his affairs could readjust themselves so suddenly, Ruth!" cried the Nievendloh. There was a bitter tone in her usually pliant voice. "I felt as if I had tumbled from the clouds, when Countess

Sternow informed me to-day that he is to be chief of the Manège, and will shortly depart for Hanover. Things must have taken a strangely propitious turn. He must either have inherited a goodly sum, or somebody has paid his debts : for that he was deeply embarrassed is an indisputable fact. My young friend Babendorf was well informed, you may depend upon it ! ”

“ I should be glad to know the rumor to be true,” replied Erl Queen with perfect composure. “ Perhaps his ‘ good friends ’ saw his unpaid notes through a microscope, and our credulous people were needlessly alarmed by the exaggerated reports of the Baron’s ruin.”

Norbert disliked to be compelled to play the eavesdropper. He moved to the opposite side of the room. There his eyes were arrested by the sight of a handsomely appointed writing-desk. In the center of the desk stood an elegant frame surrounding the portrait of a lady, whose pale, proud face bore a striking resemblance to Ruth’s. A sprig of cypress adorned the glass ; it was undoubtedly the picture of the Countess Stephanie of Saaleck-Hardenberg, the Erl Queen’s dead mother. Near it was a little pastel, representing the face of a young man in military uniform ; the

same face occurred again and again—a little older each time, disclosing at last the face of an oldish, sickly-looking man—the Baron of Altingen. There was the portrait of an old woman, beautiful as Venus, wrapped in laces and roses, with large and lustrous eyes of jet, and softly-swelling lips, around which played a most seductive smile. The forehead was marked with the characteristics of frivolity and greed for enjoyment; the little white hand which dallied with the fan betrayed an inordinate desire for wielding power of its own. “The beautiful stepmother,” thought Norbert . . . Princess Josephine, once, twice—then a little portrait of Anna, and one of Made-moiselle Marion.

Norbert arose and scanned the room. The arrangement of the furniture was as tasteful as it was refined, and betrayed the presence of a lady. Norbert walked to the table—Ruth’s paint brushes were scattered over it; the sketch of a girl’s head was also lying there: Anna’s, no doubt, although far from complete. A book bound in morocco with R. V. A. in gilt letters on the cover. There was no further possibility of doubt: Lenz had conducted him to the apartment of the mistress of Altingen!

A flush of alarm and humiliation spread over Norbert's face ; he turned to seek instant refuge in the corridor ; his fingers were already on the door-handle, when the voice of Alice arrested him.

"Heavens, already four o'clock ! I must go, dearest !" Norbert heard a chair hastily pushed aside. "I am going to attend the sacred concert, and must change my dress first : there is no telling who might be present !"

Sangoulème's arm fell limply by his side. To leave the room now meant to meet the Nievendloh, thereby giving rise to idle questions and suppositions, and that would be dangerous material for her riotous imagination. He stood rooted to the spot, helpless, undecided what to do. The situation was painful to the last degree.

"Has the ball agreed with you ?" Alice resumed anew. "Oh, Ruth, it was divine, superlative. My enchanting mariner has turned my head completely. I yearn for the sight of his face, and hope to see him at the concert. A dangerous man, de Sangoulème, Ruth. *He has said things to me . . .* If I were vain, I should say, he looks with favor upon me ! Such eyes ! Ah, heavens, what glances they have shot at me !"

One could not dream that so much fire dwelt behind his stately, solemn air. He is a Don Juan, a veritable Don Juan ! ”

Norbert was startled. His first impulse was to burst open the door and confront the shameless liar. He held his breath and drew near the door, listening feverishly.

“ Please, my sweet Ruth, tell me a little more about him ! ” coaxed the Nievendloh. “ How cruel you are, you little rogue ; you sell your information very dearly, just as you did in regard to those interesting details about his mother-governess. It was purely an accident that I lured the statement from you. Of your own accord you would not have told me a word, although you knew how deeply I was interested ! You say his uncle is game-keeper in your neighborhood ? Do you *know* these people ? ”

Norbert’s lips trembled. His eyes involuntarily closed for a moment, and he pressed his hands to his temples. “ It was a falsehood, then ! Ruth had *not* maligned him, not made game of him ! ”

“ I know M. de Sangoulème’s family very well indeed ! ” replied Ruth haughtily. “ They are my warmest, dearest friends, and if I envy him anything it is his precious old *Grossmütterchen*,

whom I revere and esteem as highly as any lady, even among the exquisite aristocrats of our infallible Residence ! ”

“ Another one of your poignant sallies, *petite* ! Why do you persist in directing your venom against those that belong to your own sphere and rank. You smite your own face with it, and ought not to forget the moral ! Will you ever learn to be more circumspect ? Laugh as much as you please, some day you will agree with me ! So you know the game-keeper’s family ? They may be nice people, but indigent, of course. Heavens, when one of our set imagines the parlor of a forester’s-lodge, it does not need much fancy to draw an accurate picture of it : Dogs, guns, tobacco clouds, a set of blue china coffee-cups, a clumsy kitchen-maid, with the odor of the milch-cow about her——” Alice laughed immoderately. “ It’s dreadful, Ruth, to think of that delightful de Sangoulème amidst such plebeian surroundings ! ”

“ I thought you were in love with him ? If I loved a man truly I would not care about the quality of the frame that surrounds his picture.”

Ruth’s voice was quiet and firm, and Norbert’s

heart beat wildly, as he drank in the honeyed meaning of her words. Was this the language of a woman 'who could not make a man happy'?

"Heavens, how poetical!" laughed Alice. "You speak of love like a sentimental shepherdess! In our days we are unfortunately more sober and realistic; we think of income first, and ask the money-bags whether they will countenance the tender affection that has stolen into our hearts, the rest comes afterwards. I confess, I think de Sangoulème splendid, superb, and if everything else were as it should be, I might shut my eyes to the relationship, and swallow it into the bargain. They live a long ways from here, and an occasional visit would answer every purpose!"

"Serpent!" hissed Norbert, pale as death.

"Good gracious, Ruth, do not look daggers at me!" jeered the pretty Lady-in-waiting saucily. "No enmities, or I shall omit your name from the list of wedding-guests, child! Adieu again, I expect you to coffee ere long. Send your fac-totum, Lenz, with a note to let me know when you are coming! Remember me to the little 'wood-nymph,' Anna, and the Donna Marion! Her Excellency will bring you the tickets for the coming Women's Bazaar in person—do not take

too many of them, the prizes are exceedingly shabby ! Adieu, my angel ! ”

The door creaked ; an impatient order was given in the hall to the Nievendloh’s lackey : there was a second tender leave-taking, and the high heels of Fräulein Ruth were heard at last to clatter down the stairs.

Norbert’s heart throbbed wildly. His nerves were still unstrung from the excitement of the past few moments ; and he sauntered to the window and gazed down on the lively avenue in order to recover his mental balance.

Soft foot-steps came gradually nearer ; the young man pressed his hand on the marble window-sill and faced about. His eyes hung spell-bound on the door ; he dared not breathe.

The portières were thrown apart, and Ruth entered the room. She was in a “brown study,” and walked slowly toward the table. Her robe was plain and without a single ornament, almost like a mourning garment.

Norbert gazed wistfully into her dejected face. It was unusually pale to-day, and a strange line, caused by profound mental suffering, was drawn around her delicate mouth. Ruth took the sketch from the table, and carried it toward the light

The silken window-draperies fluttered, the girl lifted her head, and, almost paralyzed with sudden fear, found herself confronting Norbert.

“M. de Sangoulème !”

“I beg your pardon, Baroness, but I am not to blame for trespassing upon your premises !” cried Norbert, hastening forward to meet her. “Lenz conducted me to this room without telling me that it was your boudoir.”

Ruth smiled. “It is no crime, M. de Sangoulème, and needs no excuse. Lenz is accustomed to see good friends of the family received in these rooms ! Are you waiting for Anna ? Pray be seated, and content yourself with my society until the ladies return from town !”

The young seaman bowed, and leaned his arms on the carved back of a chair.

“I came to say farewell,” replied he huskily, and to offer my services as a messenger. If there are letters or packages for home, I beg that they may be intrusted to my care !”

“Will you take friendly greetings with you also, M. de Sangoulème ?” asked Erl Queen with charming witchery. She took up her pencil, and began to shade Anna’s eyes, “I have a whole bag-

full. First for *Grossmütterchen* and uncle Forester—the longest and most cordial ; then to my little man, Hans, say many tender things, and if I am not imposing on your good nature, I will load you down with a box of city-bonbons for him! My love to Nimrod, old Dorothy and our dear, old coffee-pot! Give them a thousand warm greetings from me, and when you ramble through the quiet forest, tell the oaks and the fir-trees that I have not forgotten them : and *if* your way should lead you through the clover-dell . . .”

“What shall I tell the clover-dell?”

“That I love it, and yearn for it both day and night!”

A passionate outlook flashed from her eyes over Norbert's face, and the expression that dwelt for a moment on his countenance made the girl tremble.

“You long for home? Then why do you remain here?” asked he, coldly. Unwittingly he drew himself up to his full height, his breast heaving with the throb of expectation that oppressed his heart.

“It is not yet time to return,” replied she gloomily. There fell a silence, interrupted only by the tinkling bell in the vestibule.

"Here comes Ännchen," cried Ruth, rising hurriedly. "I will go and call her!" She started for the door.

"Fräulein Ruth!" Norbert raised his hand and stopped her progress.

The girl trembled under the spell of his excitable, sonorous voice. She stopped and looked up at him.

"Anna will learn from Lenz that I am here," said he with eyes cast timidly on the floor, "and she will come to seek me. Permit me first to say a word or two to you alone. Who knows, whether we shall ever see each other again in life!"

He pressed his hand passionately to his heart, and looked fixedly into her eyes. "Do not send me away in anger again, Ruth. Let me unburden my soul, and pardon me. I have been impolite, unjust, offensive to you in these latter days. I allowed myself to be guided by false impressions, and trampled underfoot the very mildest forms of social duty. I believed that which I should have put far from me as something impossible, and rather than ask, I doubted! But you were noble and good, and, although your haughty bearing wounded me, it was my fault, perhaps, be-

cause I knew not how to take you, and placed a harder facet in opposition to one already hard enough. We do not understand each other, Ruth, and if we had it in our power to gather roses, we should still in blind perversity reach for the thorn! I am going away, perhaps forever. A seafarer should part from everything with a butterfly heart, pitching overboard all ballast of regretful thoughts. I cannot do this, unless I tear out my heart by its roots and bury it in the depths of the sea. The thought that you might think of me with scorn has pursued me like a phantom-scorpion during the past two years. I fancied that I heard your angry voice in the storm! From the waves rolling in the distance I saw weird, gloomy scenes arise, and when the sun glittered athwart the snowy sails, it seemed to me that it shone over the faded letters under that old oil-portrait—*sic eunt fata hominum.*”

Norbert paused. He looked most earnestly at Ruth, and continued in a muffled voice: “My next commission will be a long and serious one. Long months lie between its end and now; and the waves that rock our lives tell me of many a treacherous cliff and dangerous rock between-time. The sky may be blue and serene to-day, tomor-

row the tempest howls again ! Send me away into my loneliness with a friendly memory—let there be peace between us ! All I ask is a kindly word from you, a blessing on my cruise, that I may face the future serenely, no matter how it brings the clouds around the mast-head ! Let every shadow be blotted out that has come between us during these last days ! Think of me, as you would of the dead, with whom one argues no more, and whom we do not judge, cannot judge—but keep in mind as we would an absent friend ! Will you do this, Ruth, will you let me go in peace ? ”

He held out his hand to her ; on his handsome brow glowed the reflection of the fiery passion that scorched his soul.

Erl Queen trembled in every limb. She disengaged her hands, which had been convulsively clasped during his speech, and extended them to him gently : “ Yes ! I will, I will ! ” faltered she with lowered head.

Norbert caught the rosy fingers and, clasping them passionately in his own, stooped and pressed a burning kiss upon them. He held her at arm’s length from him and devoured with his eyes the girl’s pale, lovely face. Then he released the

little hands. "God keep you," said he hoarsely, his pallid lips scarce moving : "And farewell !"

Ere Ruth could raise her tear-dimmed eyes to his the heavy draperies of the door had closed behind him.

"Norbert, Norbert ! Here you are at last !" cried Ännchen from without. Erl Queen sank down on her chair, and buried her face in her hands. The tears that burn ran down her cheeks, and her heart was heavy, heavy enough to break beneath its load of hopeless longing and remorseful grief.

"I shall never see him again !" was the cry of anguish that broke from her white lips. With her hands folded over her breast, the girl's eyes sought the gloomy oil portrait, which had accompanied her to her present abode. She smiled, yon pallid woman, holding the broken blade aloft ! Wan roses fell withered from her hair, the lips opened plaintively, and kissed the blood-stained scarf that hung from the handle of the sword : *Sic eunt fata hominum !*

All was still—still as the grave in the chamber of the Erl Queen.



XIII.

IN a large arm-chair sat Princess Josephine with a face as though of death ; Ruth's arm was wound gently around her shoulders, and the white head of the aged lady was softly bedded on the breast of the young girl.

Ruth cast a look of anxious reproach on the young officer, who knelt before the Princess and covered her hands with kisses.

"Forgive me, Your Highness !" he whispered, "I could remain silent no longer—where the honor of my father was at stake !"

The eyes of the invalid spoke volumes, as they rested on the speaker's handsome face.

"Do not hesitate to tell me all, Herr von Otthardt," said the Princess Josephine, pressing her lips to the dainty lace weft which Ruth had saturated with some reviving essence. "I was overcome by my emotion and the recollections of the past ; this fainting-spell will pass away. You say your father had written to me——"

“May I not choose a more opportune moment for my disclosures, Your Highness?” asked the Baron with a solicitous look at the Princess’ excited countenance. “I can be at your service at any time ; and, please God, you will soon recover from this attack, and have forgotten all about it on the morrow——”

“No, no !” opposed the Princess strenuously. “Do not postpone your revelations one moment longer ! Who knows aught about tomorrow ? I would not wish to leave this world as Moses did, who saw the promised land before his eyes, and was denied the joy of entering it. Speak, Herr von Otthardt, I cannot bear the suspense any longer !”

The young man sprang to his feet. His manly, stalwart figure stood proudly outlined against the light background of the wall, and the striking resemblance between father and son was more clearly visible than ever. The Princess listened to his words as in a dream—her pale lips breathed half audibly the name of the lover of her youth.

“Up to the present day it has proved impossible for me to obtain an audience with Your Highness,” began the young officer, with down-cast eyes, “although I tried, and energetically, ever

since the day on which I attained my majority. I was met at every turn by the dark barriers of hatred, and my earnest pleas were answered with the heartless rebuke, that my name could not be mentioned in your presence, unless the offender wished to incur the penalty of your disfavor. While examining old letters and documents, which to the day of my majority had lain undisturbed in my father's writing-desk, I found in the secret drawer, among a number of faded mementoes, a sealed envelope. Bearing no address, I opened it. It contained various papers, three of which were written by my father's hand. I unfolded them and read their contents. One was addressed to Your Highness, and was inscribed : 'My darling Josephine !' " Otthardt paused and glanced irresolutely at the Princess, who had hidden her face on the breast of the young girl with a convulsive sob ; but with a hurried gesture she bade him continue his narration.

" The letter was a tender, passionate avowal of everlasting fidelity, at the same time informing the addressee that Her Excellency, the lady of the household, had interviewed him by order of the Duke and announced to him that the Princess was about to enter into a matrimonial engagement

which was in every way suited to her rank, and that he, the writer, was forbidden to seek her presence, unless he wished to risk her deep displeasure. My father begs in this letter, that the Princess would confirm the truth of this message by a single line from her hand. In this same envelope I found a short note written in a lady's hand, which contains the following brief sentences :

“ ‘ In the name of Her Highness, the Princess, I return your letters unopened. Her Highness is disposed to obey the wishes of her father, hereby dissolving any mutual relations that may have possibly existed heretofore.

‘ Respectfully,

‘ STEPHANIE, COUNTESS SAALECK-HARDENBERG.’ ”

A stifled cry of horror interrupted his narration. With a face that was ghastly in its pallor, Ruth stood before the Baron and grasped his arm.

“ My mother ? Oh, infamy, shameless infamy ! ” With flashing eyes the girl turned toward the Princess and clasped her hand convulsively : “ Tell him, Your Highness, that this thing is impossible ! ” she frantically cried.

Josephine's burning eyes were fixed on Otthardt. “ Be quiet, my darling,” said she brokenly, gently

stroking the hands of the young girl, "it *is* an infamy, an incredible infamy! Have you the letters, Herr von Otthardt?"

The young officer drew his portfolio from his breast-pocket, opened it, and took from it several documents, which he presented to the Princess with a courteous bow. "I never doubted for a moment, Your Highness, that the letter and the signature were forgeries," he said quietly, "for the notes that followed reveal several indubitable discrepancies in the writing. It was only in a moment of passionate despair that my father could have failed to note the suspicious irregularities——"

The Princess held the sheet with trembling fingers, so that the light fell full upon it. "Come, Ruth, and see if you can discover any pencil tracings!" said she, with quivering lips. "Here is an erasure, and here again, always in the same letter, the capital H!"

"I can see it distinctly, Your Highness! It confirms my previous suspicion," nodded Otthardt, while Erl Queen remained motionless on her knees before the Princess. "What perfidious hand can have prepared this masterpiece of treachery?"

An odd smile hovered on the lips of the Princess: "I know the hand, Herr von Otthardt!" she cried, in a shrill, unnatural voice. "God forgive the infamous woman for the unspeakable woe she conjured up by these small, false, forged characters! The miserable tool of a desperate man, she has bartered her eternal salvation for the price of diabolic spite."

The eyes of the Princess were riveted upon the faded sheet in her hand.

"The Leubwitz—none other but the Countess Leubwitz!" muttered she to herself. "The action was inspired by jealousy, and its reward was a string of diamonds for her neck! She did well, indeed! Each one of these little flourishes sundered two faithful hearts Give me these letters, dear Otthardt—I must have certainty. The writing shall be examined by experts through my nephew Leopold! Thanks to the progress of modern science, it is not hard to unmask the villany of our fellow-creatures. And you, my dear little Ruth, do not be grieved for a moment by this cowardly piece of infamy! The world will shatter ere I doubt the loyalty of Stephanie! Tear my heart from my breast, but leave me my faith in her!" Josephine took Erl Queen's cold

hands between her own and kissed her lips tenderly. "If Stephanie had thus deceived me, do you suppose she would send her child to me to lift the dreadful veil from the dead past? Be brave, my sweet. With God's help we shall soon see clearly through this web of falsehood. What say the other letters, Herr von Otthardt?"

"My father made three more desperate but futile attempts to force his way into your presence, with passionate protests and remonstrances," replied the young man excitedly, "but the answers he received from her Ladyship, the Countess Leubwitz, were such that could not but sting the haughty nature of my father to the quick—and they explain his unexpected marriage to my mother! The infamous story, that His Highness, the Grand-Duke, bribed my father to this deed, is a contemptible lie, which could never have originated save in the minds of heartless wretches. I have in my possession receipts which prove that the trifling indebtedness my father incurred at the gaming-table during an evil moment was cancelled by my grand-father on my mother's side."

The lips of the Princess twitched nervously. "The world censures no means despicable enough to undermine the honorable name of a fellow-

creature !” cried she, with unwonted asperity. “ I desire, Herr von Otthardt, that you will go at once and seek an interview with Leopold, my nephew, and immediately take the steps necessary to expose the whole infamous plot ! I will give you a line of introduction, and hope you will go to him at once ! Dear Ruth, yonder on the little stand you will find paper and a pencil—hand me my red portfolio. Thank you, my dear—it will not take me long. Be seated, Otthardt ! ”

Ruth retreated to the recess of the window, followed by the young officer. Outside, lead-colored clouds hung in the sky, and over the distant gables glistened the last rays of the dying sun. Otthardt was silent, but on his handsome countenance lingered the expression of quiet, but defiant joy. At last he turned to Ruth and said : “ It is to you that I owe everything, Baroness, for this day will wash from the name of Otthardt the stain that has clung to it so long. It shall prove the turning-point of my life. People were right who called me frivolous. Nobody reproved me, nobody warned me to do better. Men shrugged their shoulders, and exclaimed : he is an Otthardt : how can he help it ? I lived a life of hail-fellow-well-met, and fed on the honest name of one

maligned by calumny. Things shall be different from now. My new position brings me into strange surroundings, and among new people, who do not know me, or my past. I will not lead the life of a hermit, Fräulein Ruth—for the blood of a cavalry-leader floods my veins; but I will do like many of my comrades. and live according to my income by doing without that for which I cannot pay. This new life I owe to you, Baroness, and although I am far from believing now that *Love* aroused your charity, I am convinced that your action in my behalf was prompted by high and most unselfish motives, and for what you have done permit me to kiss your little hand! You endeavored to snatch me from ruin, and have unwittingly opened to me a new road, the end of which shall be worthy of your generous interference. I have never before in all my life spoken so frankly to a human being, for I have never encountered such kindness and friendship. If my trifling ways have offended you, forgive me, for I rue them bitterly! God bless you, Fräulein Ruth!” He stooped over her hand, and kissed it respectfully. Without giving her time to reply, he walked back to the center of the room, and received the note of introduction from the Princess’ hands.

“May God go with you, my young friend!” cried Josephine with deep emotion. “Bring me an answer soon, and come and see me often, as often as your time permits, and that without reserve or hesitation. The world shall see that wonders never cease, and that an *Otthardt* passes in and out of the right wing of the castle as a *valued friend*.” She extended her frail hand to the young man, and followed him with her eyes until he disappeared from view.

A hectic flush suffused the sunken cheeks of the Princess—her breathing grew labored. “Ruth,” whispered she softly, “yonder in my desk—the center compartment—the smallest—open it, the key is in the lock! Yes, there! Pull it out, a little further down—underneath the letters—a small package, give it to me, child, ah, yes—this is it—thank you, Ruth, thank you!” With wide-open, shining eyes the Princess broke the massive black seals, and loosed the paper wrapper.

A small ivory miniature fell out, and revealed, untouched by the sharp tooth of time, the wonderfully handsome head of an officer, with lustrous eyes and haughty, lightly-furrowed brow. A smile wreathed the mouth, a valiant smile, that seemed to challenge fate. The Princess’ eyes hung spell-

bound on the dainty treasure. "Dietrich! Dietrich!" moaned the sad-faced woman, with agonizing meaning in her trembling voice. The faded rose-leaves rained down into her lap, a deathly pallor spread over the aged countenance, and Josephine sank back senseless in her chair—the little ivory portrait falling to the floor in unconscious imitation of its owner.





XIV.

THE news of the dangerous illness of the Princess Josephine spread like fire through the town. Fräulein von Nievendloh departed very suddenly to visit an aunt in Berlin, said the gossips, and to consult some prominent authority about her shattered nerves, although Fräulein Alice had never before been known to complain of such an infirmity. Her friends shrugged their shoulders compassionately, and did not blame her for seeking to escape from the boredom of nursing the invalid Princess. Alice had no talent for it, and had suffered enough, as it was, in the service of the frail old lady.

Ruth von Altingen had taken the place of the Nievendloh ; and, from the day on which the Princess fell ill, the young girl occupied the apartments vacated by Alice.

Ruth hardly stirred from the bedside of the Princess by day or night ; her presence acted like some mysterious healthful soporific at war with the hallucinations of the sick lady—her small, delicate hands passed gently over the throbbing brow, and the softly whispered words calmed the patient's tortured brain. It was pitiful to see how Josephine clung to the slender form, crying every now and then with a wan, delirious smile: "Oh, Stephanie, have you come back to me at last!"

Prince Leopold was Ruth's faithful assistant. He carried his cherished aunt from sofa to couch, and from the bed to the chair ; he cradled her tenderly in his strong, loving arms, and hushed her to sleep on his breast, when the fever shook her feeble frame.

Outside a storm was raging, and the snow beat crazily against the window-frames ; trees creaked beneath the load, and the weather-vane veered on the roof with shrill and plaintive cries. It was a wild, uncanny night.

Josephine stirred. "Stephanie, do you hear? He is calling me again—again ! Will *nobody* open the door ! Go, Stephanie, for *you* are not afraid of the ghosts, that come flying on the white wings

of the storm ; they harm no one, they only gibber and sigh ! Do you hear—ah, do you hear ? They are knocking at the windows with their bony fingers, and their long white winding-sheets are flapping on the glass ! Drive them away, Stephanie—I am afraid of them ! Hark, how impatient they are growing, and now they laugh ! Yes, yes—it is the death-voice of the Leubwitz ! Oho ! do you hear, how she laughs over the infamous trick that she has played ! How the diamonds sparkle around her neck, like genuine sun-rays ! And there flies Satan on sable wings ! And he laughs even more fiercely than *she* does. He snatches at the glittering string of gems, and draws it tighter and tighter around her scraggy throat, like a hangman's noose ! Hark, how she shrieks and draws her ghastly face ! *She does not want to die !* Life was far too sweet, and Otthardt believed in the forged letters ! Hark, how the wildering chase of ghosts tears through the tottering house ! This is an evil night—all graves are open ! Go, Stephanie, and do not keep him waiting long ! He will be in the orange-grotto in the winter-garden, and in his hand he will hold a red rose ! Oh, he has not deceived me ! You always told me, Stephanie, that he was neither weak nor

wicked—and I believed your words ! But the Leubwitz, she could not bear to see we loved each other, and she transformed herself into a serpent, and crawled into our paradise ! Away, away ! Do you see her groveling in the dust, the diamonds around her neck, and her tongue piercing my heart ? Ah, Stephanie ! ”

With a convulsive gasp Josephine fell back on her pillows. Her hands dropped from Ruth’s arm, and fell limp on the satin coverlet.

Tears filled the Erl Queen’s eyes : she looked compassionately at Leopold, who sat in a high arm-chair by the side of the tester-bed. The young man nodded in silence to the girl.

Suddenly the Princess started again ; her eyes were no longer glassy and expressionless : a spark of consciousness seemed to flash through the delirious brain.

“ Leopold, you here, my darling ? ” she faltered in surprise. “ What do you want, it is night and the lamp is burning ! Ah, and Ruth ! I know, children, you have come to tell me about the letters, Leo, my pet—and Ruth is also waiting ! Tell me, dear, it was a forgery. Stephanie did not deceived me ? ”

“ No, dear aunt, never, never ! ” whispered the

young Prince, stroking the invalid's hands tenderly. "It has been proven beyond a doubt that the writing was a forgery. We always thought so! And now, my precious little foster-mother, try to sleep! Come, rest in my arms. I'll hold you as safe as if you were laid in the lap of Heaven. Close your eyes, and I will sing you one of the songs with which you have so often rocked me to sleep in my childhood."

With a happy, contented smile the old lady's head dropped on the shoulder of the Prince. It was touching to see this big, clumsy man tenderly and carefully sustaining the frail frame of his aunt, and to hear his rolling sailor's voice drop to the softest humming of a lullaby.

"But the letters?" clamored the Princess anew, with delirious eyes.

"You shall have them in the morning! Sleep now, dear auntie!" He laid his hand upon the feverish brow, and beckoned to the Erl Queen, who lowered the light, and crouched on a stool by the side of the bed—she was tired and weary unto death. The clock ticked softly; in the adjoining room the deep breathing of the Sister of Charity was heard, and in an hour or two the doctor's carriage would be rolling into the court-yard.

The girl's fair head sank lower and lower ; the slender hands were folded in her lap.

"Thank God, she is sleeping calmly !" whispered a voice by her ear, and Prince Leopold touched her shoulder gently. "The clock has just struck two, Fräulein Ruth, and you must lie down now !"

Erl Queen raised her heavy eye-lids, and pushed the tangled curls from her forehead. "The Sister will relieve me at three ; until then you must allow me to remain, Your Highness. I'll take a book and read. That's a sure remedy for drooping spirits !"

Leopold looked straight at her. "Your presence is not necessary at all, Baroness ; I am guardian enough while she sleeps, and you look pale, very pale and weary ! Come, let me conduct you across the hall !"

"Yes, I am very tired," confessed the young girl, "but will retire only on one condition !"

"And that is ?" He took her hand gently within his own.

"That you have me called if Her Highness asks for me !"

"I promise !" nodded Leopold, and raised the white hand to his lips, covering it with impetuous

kisses. "Ah, Fräulein Ruth, how can I thank you for your noble sacrifice! How can I ever repay you for the sleepless nights, the tender care, the tedious vigils! No recompense is adequate for such devotion! One perhaps—for what I say to you this day has never been said by me to mortal woman: you have fulfilled the ideal of my life, for which for years I vainly sought, and which has restored to me my blissful faith in loyalty and tender womanliness!"

Josephine stirred in her sleep; Leopold paused, and led the Erl Queen to the door of the room.

"Sleep, Baroness," whispered he as he parted from her, "your pale cheeks cut me to the quick."

Ruth smiled softly. "Sleep will not help them, Your Highness; but when our beloved invalid is once more on the way to recovery, joy will be the surest remedy! You owe me no gratitude, Prince. I am amply repaid for the little I have been able to do by the permission to remain with my august friend. Good night, Your Highness! I will lay down on the sofa, prepared to come at a moment's notice."

"Please God, we shall not need you!" said Leopold, "but if it is absolutely necessary, I'll keep my promise and will send for you. God

bless you !” He pressed her hand again, and closed the door noiselessly behind her.

In the sick-room all was silent. How lonely and dull it seemed since the little fair-haired girl had left it ! The Prince walked to the window and pulled the heavy curtains aside. The clouds raced in tattered shreds across the sky ; a pale moon-beam stole athwart the snow-covered path, and the black outline of a wandering hound flitted over the broad avenue of the park. The gates creaked on their rusty hinges, and from the cathedral came the solemn peals of the bell.

Leopold did not move. The East was making ready for the dawn ; a net-work of filmy rays began to crystallize across the horizon, and the cloud-masses were seamed with golden stripes ; day grew little by little, until at last the fiery sun flashed through the branches of the trees, and dispatched its first messengers to the lonely palace-room, to announce to the tired watchers that another night of care and anxiety was over.

The young Prince sighed aloud. He dreamed of his cherished sea with its misty morning salutation ; he stretched out his arms as if to embrace an absent loved-one—his eyes were closed as though in sleep. He heard the waves lap against

the keel, and the soft whispering of the wind in the sails and rigging : a fresh, cool breeze blew around his face, and under his feet rocked the deck of the *Nelson*. Suddenly the golden head of a girl emerged from the white-capped waves. A fantastic crown encircled her brow, and aldersprigs twined in her hair ; she lifted her white hands and beckoned him to come. Leopold started from his reverie, and stared into the wintry dawn. The vision faded slowly away, the golden crown dissolved in foam, and the Erl Queen disappeared over the silent deep.

Soon the Sister-of-Charity came in, and asked in quiet tones about the patient's welfare. Down in the court-yard the doctor's carriage was drawing up before the entrance.

The Prince passed his hand over his forehead. "A dream," murmured he, "lucky he, who thus can dream, and wake without a disappointment."



XV.

THE PRINCESS JOSEPHINE recovered very slowly from her protracted illness. The snow had begun to melt, and the first green blades broke through the pall that covered the earth, as the infirm lady attempted to saunter for the first time through the rooms, supported by the loving arms of her nephew.

Ruth was a daily guest at the castle ; and her presence, ever soothing as a sunbeam, carried gladness into the life of the suffering woman. Leopold was his old, merry self again ; his humorous sallies began to flow anew, and every symptom of the brooding melancholy that had seemed to fill his heart for the past few weeks was chased away by a return of wonted gaiety. The sudden change was ascribed to the illness of his beloved foster-mother, and therefore excited little comment. Nobody guessed that this appearance had

a contrary significance, and was owing to a settled gloom that had fallen on his heart. Josephine alone knew what troubled her darling. Sitting at the feet of the invalid, he had confessed, bitterly bewailing the fate that destined him to be the future ruler of a people and denied him the privilege enjoyed by the humblest of his subjects : to choose the companion of his life where Love led the way ! He cursed the golden chains which etiquette and conventionality had so pitilessly woven around his liberty, and quailed beneath the thralldom of hereditary power. Josephine succeeded at last in banishing these gloomy thoughts that threatened to forever overshadow the young man's laughter-loving nature, and lured back ray after ray of sunshine, until at last the old merriment returned, and the Prince basked in the presence of the Erl Queen as gladly and resignedly as before.

Spring came at last, and blue skies smiled upon the awakening earth. The breath of new life floated over park and field.

The winter-garden was in full bloom with a myriad fresh and fragrant blossoms. The sunlight streaked unhindered through the arched glass roof, and the delicate lance-like shadows of

palm-leaves fell over the sandy paths and closely trimmed grass mounds. Water splashed softly in the marble basin, supported on the backs of grinning tritons.

The muffled noise of a wheel-chair was heard in an adjoining chamber: the door was softly thrown open, and, supported on the arms of Ruth and the faithful Frau Rössel, Princess Josephine tottered into this bower of luxuriant loveliness. All was quiet; a subdued light filled the orange-grotto; the young moss vied in softness with the silken cushions on the rustic seats. The Princess rested on a couch amidst the emerald branches. She dismissed her companions with a gentle gesture of the hand. Frau Rössel drew the Erl Queen's hand on her arm, and led her away through the tall shrubs and oleander-groves.

The Princess Josephine folded her hands and lifted her pale face to the white flowers that drooped from the tree under which she sat. Orange-blossoms were in full bloom—as they had been *then*: a timid sun-beam trembled over the gravel path—two dark, lustrous eyes seemed to gaze at her, telling her of a man's faithful love. Here, in this self-same spot——

Twenty-eight years had passed since Josephine

had set foot in the winter-garden. The faded rose-leaves that covered the little miniature trembled ; bloom-laden branches seemed to caress her in full sympathy. The sad-eyed Princess buried her withered countenance in her frail hands, and bitterly but softly wept for youth's lost Love.





XVI.

“My son, my son, I see aright,
’T is the gray old willows deceives thy sight !”

RUTH VON ALTINGEN was seated in her own room, reading a letter. An angry flush spread over her face, and the soft lips were compressed against her teeth in bitter scorn.

“Has it come to this, at last !” muttered she with a groan.

“My dear Ruth !” said the writer in her epistle, “you will be surprised to receive a line from me—but your father has been so infirm and peevish that he evinces interest neither in letters nor anything else. He has suddenly conceived the silly idea of returning at once to the capital, while I am swimming in a sea of gaieties ! He sees, from day to day, how delightfully I am entertaining myself in this adorable Monaco—but there is no end to his obstinacy. He is gradually growing old and unmanageable. Take care, my dear, and do not commit the folly of marrying an old man. Such deeds of compassion avenge themselves in no long time. Altingen torments me dreadfully, and insists **even** that I shall dine with him in our rooms, while I have

the most agreeable of vis-à-vis at the table d'hôte, a thoroughly amusing Viscount, whom all Paris adores, and on whose account three wives have already separated from their pedantic husbands. He, of course, married neither of them—— Oh, I could kill myself with laughing! I am beside myself with rage at the idea of being forced to leave this charming place, where people know so well how to amuse themselves! 'Enjoy life,' is the motto here; and absolutely no gossiping Dame Grundy could survive. 'The Jolly Prison' we call our hotel. Good appellation for it, *n'est-ce pas?*

"Dear Ruth, if your father *insists* in his caprice to drag me away from here, we shall arrive at Villa Olivia in a week. Have everything in readiness for our return; and order for me a handsome new brougham. The Viscount has presented me with an elegant span of inseparables, beautiful little animals, which I am going to bring with me. I hope to have you with me for a few days; your father would also be very glad to meet you. He often speaks of you. I hope you will send your 'Wood-nymph' away before our arrival, for you certainly cannot expect me to associate with such vulgar people, dear! *Au revoir, carissima;* Altingen sends his love and I '*toutes mes amitiés.*' Pray for me, that I may be allowed to remain a little longer in this earthly Eden.

"Your tortured mother,

"ADINE VON ALTINGEN,

"Née BARONESS DE NORDENWERTH.

"N. B.—Are there any balls in prospect, or are the goody goody people of the Residence keeping Lent?"

Ruth crushed the scented letter in her hand, and threw it with a gesture of disgust into the burning fire. Tears of indignation glistened in the girl's pure eyes, as she walked to the door and gave the bell a violent pull.

"I cannot do it, I cannot!" cried she, with passionately clasped hands. "I cannot bear the presence of this woman! Oh, father, poor, unfortunate father! Is this her reward for your unselfish love and devotion, the wealth of tenderness that you have showered upon her, to leave you alone in illness and misery, flitting from pleasure to pleasure in the company of frivolous adventurers! And shall I desert thee also, after thy long absence, when a sense of loneliness and yearning drives thee home, and no comfort is left for thine old age if I, too, shrink from thy presence! For thy sake I will endure it—will clench my teeth, and remain a few hours after the arrival. The wife will not be likely to disturb our meeting, when there are two 'inseparables' to take up her time and attention! Yes, I will stay and await my father's coming! The day will pass, as many other days in life have passed that have inflicted pain! And then I will hasten home to my beloved forest-castle!

Oh, God, how grateful I shall be ! How happy I shall be ! ”

Lenz appeared in the door in answer to her summons.

“ I desire to speak to Mademoiselle Marion,” said Ruth quietly. “ Tell her to come to me.”

The old servant withdrew to do the bidding of his mistress. Erl Queen sat down before her writing-desk, and began to pack away everything in sight with burning haste.

“ *Mon dieu*, what has happened ? ” exclaimed the little Frenchwoman, as she entered the room in breathless haste. “ Packing up, Mademoiselle Ruth ? *Ciel*, we are surely not——”

“ Going home ? Yes, yes ; in less than four-and-twenty hours all my belongings must be on their way to Altingen. We ourselves will remain until next Tuesday, after which we will follow as soon as possible. Have everything attended to, dear Marion ! This oil-portrait will go into the large mirror-box ; tell Lenz to order the carpenter to close it up securely ! ”

“ What evil spirit has taken possession of you, Ruth,” cried Mademoiselle Marion, “ that you can think of leaving here when everything is getting so beautiful, and we are only just becoming

acquainted with the people? Are you aware of the exchange you are making for this delightful city?"

"There is no time for reflection, dear Mademoiselle," smiled the lady of Altingen, with an amused glance at the horrified face of her companion. "In a week my parents will arrive, and you know that I will not breathe the same air with my step-mother, if that can be avoided."

"Within a week?" Marion staggered and fell into an easy-chair. "Heavens, so soon!"

"Just as I tell you, my dear!"

"What in the world has happened? Is His Grace, the Baron, worse, or has the Baroness grown tired of Italy?" With two rapid strides the Frenchwoman stood beside Ruth and stared breathlessly into her face.

"Something extraordinary must have happened. Oh, tell me, Ruth, pray, tell me!"

Erl Queen regarded her coldly. "There is no time for explanations, Mademoiselle," replied the mistress of Altingen icily. "Attend to my commands, and above all things notify Fräulein Anna of the impending change. *Au revoir!*"

Mademoiselle Marion was greatly perturbed. Her pale lips were already parted for some sharp

retort, but she remembered herself, turned, and swept indignantly from the room.

“Lenz! Have the trunks brought down from the garret!” her high soprano rang through the hall.





XVII.

“Oh, come, dear child, and go with me.”

“CON moto—dolce—again, please, Fräulein Anna!” Herr Hessbach raised his eyes to the face of his pupil and turned the page.

“Oh, thou, my soul’s most holy dream!” repeated Ännchen. “Dream of my life . . .”

“Fräulein Anna?”

“Herr Hessbach!”

“Why do you emphasize the ‘*thou*’?”

“Do I? I did not notice . . .”

“No? But so it seemed to me.”

“Oh, thou my soul’s most holy dream
Dream of my life forevermore——”

“Fräulein Anna?”

“Yes!”

“I think you sang the wrong note just then?”

“It seemed to me as if you had made the mistake, Herr Hessbach. See, your third finger is still on the ‘G’ chord.”

“Humph! I believe we are both a little absent-minded to-day, Fräulein Anna!”

The Forester’s pretty daughter smiled and blushed. “Ah, no, only our minds are wandering a little!”

“Which means the same thing exactly.”

There was a pause.

“Herr Hessbach!”

The young man looked wistfully at her.

“Yes!”

“Shall I sing again?”

“Yes, please!”

“Oh, thou my soul’s most holy dream . . .”

“Does it only seem so, Fräulein Anna, or am I half deaf and half blind to-day, but I imagine that you sing ‘*thou*,’ my soul, and that you look at *me*, as you sing the words!” Hessbach jumped vehemently to his feet, and gathered up the music sheets. “Ännchen, both our minds are wandering, and do you know why? All on account of that message Mademoiselle Marion sent us. It came like a thunderbolt from the clear sky, that you are going away!”

“Ah, yes,” sighed Ännchen; and this time a tear trembled on her eyelashes.

“But it will never do; it is quite out of the

question!" cried Hessbach excitedly. "What is to become of your voice, when I can train it no longer? You sing the Beautiful Dream very badly still, always emphasizing the 'thou,' while I strike the wrong keys in the accompaniment! You must admit that things cannot go on like this——"

"I will sing it again and accentuate the 'dream,' for what is life itself but a dream!" And Ännchen wiped her eyes and was silent, overcome by her emotion.

Herr Hessbach, too, looked with dismay at the notes before him. "Let's try our fortune with the 'dream' then," said he dejectedly, and sitting before the instrument began anew.

"Commence, please!"

"Oh, thou my soul's most holy dream!" sobbed Ännchen convulsively.

"Fräulein Anna!"

"Herr Hessbach?"

"It won't do! You cannot play, and I cannot sing! That is, I meant to say, you cannot sing and I cannot play. Don't you see, that I am distracted——"

"Shall I emphasize the 'soul' then?"

"The soul?" Herr Hessbach arose and

snatched his pupil's hands. "Everybody has a soul, but those who are in love have two. Ännchen, I feel so soulful all at once, that I am sure I must be in love, for when a musical director strikes the wrong key while a young lady sits beside him, it can only happen because he depends too much on the dual harmony. Ännchen, I have never struck a false chord before, nor have you ever sung a wrong note, during all our lessons ; and now all of a sudden we have become bunglers, because we are told we must separate. It is impossible for me to part with you ! You have become the golden key-string of my heart, and if that was taken from me, the harmony of my life will be destroyed. I cannot live nor work without you, my sweet little Anna, for 'thou art my soul's most holy dream' !"

The little woodland-nymph looked at him with great astonished eyes. Her tears had ceased to flow ; a feeling of dizziness came over her, as the handsome musician drew her to his breast, and pressed kiss after kiss on her rose-blossom lips. She opened her arms wide and wound them around his neck with the softly whispered words : "Oh, how dearly I love you !"

Mademoiselle Marion wondered why sound

ceased to come from the music-room. "He is giving her verbal instructions," thought she, and, being very busy, she consoled her curiosity with that.

Herr Hessbach was a conscientious lover, and set to work at once to explain his position to Ännchen. "In less than two years, my darling, I shall be appointed musical director at the Ducal Court of K I will go there first to prepare the little nest, into which I shall carry my pet as quickly as possible. Are you satisfied, my dearest?"

"Oh, yes, for grandmother has always said that a *real* courtship should last two years at least!" replied the girl timidly, "she says it is the happiest time in one's whole life."

"Even when two people must live apart?"

"Oh, but you will come often, yes, very often, and write me every day?"

"And never less than ten pages, of course! I'll talk with grandmother on that point!" said Herr Hessbach, lifting the rosy chin of the girl, and printing another kiss on her willing lips. "Get your trousseau ready, little wife . . ."

"I hear Fräulein Marion coming. Sing, dear!"

Hessbach struck the keys triumphantly: "Sing,

Fräulein Anna!" cried he aloud and with a merry voice, "dolce, dolce, and now and then 'con moto'!"

"Oh, thou my soul's most holy dream,
Dream of my life forevermore . . ."

"Bravo, Fräulein Anna, bravissimo! You are singing superbly this morning."

Ruth had taken leave of the members of the Ducal family. Her parting from the Princess Josephine was very sad. "My good angel goes from me with you, dear child," said the Princess with tears in her eyes. "Send me a sun-ray now and then, my pet, by writing to me! And if I live until next summer, I'll keep my promise, and visit the pretty hunting-castle where the soul of my beloved Stephanie dwells."

Prince Leopold happened to be leaning against the window-frame in the ante-chamber, when Ruth paid her last visit to the Princess. He was very pale and grave, and looked years older. "Farewell, Erl Queen," said he, as the girl approached him, "and if at any time in your life you need a friend, you will know where to find him. God bless you! Come back to us soon!" He

stooped over her hand and pressed his lips to the delicate fingers. Just at this moment Fräulein von Nievendloh entered the room. "And when my Aunt Josephine comes to see you in the spring, you will have to house me into the bargain as her travelling companion!" continued he with a forced laugh. "*Auf Wiedersehen!* at castle Altingen!"

He waved his hand in a parting salute, and was gone.

On the day on which Fräulein von Altingen took her departure, she carried in her hand an exquisite posy of pink roses. Nobody knew whence it came—but a lone horseman was seen riding a furious race with the train that carried the mistress of Altingen toward her home. Ruth saw him. She raised the fragrant flowers to her face, leaned her head far out of the window, and waved him a salute with the roses in her hand.

"Is not that Prince Leopold?" asked Mademoiselle Marion, fumbling in every pocket for her eye-glass. "Surely I cannot be mistaken . . ."

"Yes, it is he," said Ruth, and turned her face aside. "He is evidently on his way to the manœuvres."

Erl Queen fell back among the cushions of her

seat and closed her eyes. "The heavy odor of the flowers is tiring the nerves of the mistress of Altingen," thought Anna.

At last the leaves of the forest-trees rustled above the heads of the little party ; the fresh, pure woodland atmosphere blew around the weary faces of the travellers. The sky was bright and clear, and not a sound was heard save the jubilant voices of the birds. Down in the valley old Petermann was herding his sheep as of old, knitting away at his blue stocking, his immense soft-brimmed hat hanging far down his neck. "Petermann !" cried Ruth joyously, raising her gaudily-colored parasol, and waved and shook it at the old man.

Petermann looked up from his knitting, and, with his hands shading his eyes, gazed in the direction from which he fancied he had heard his name called.

It was the Altingen carriage that came rolling down the avenue from Kirschbach ; he knows the two black horses very well, and behind comes rumbling a big cart, heavily laden with trunks and boxes. "Mercy on us, the Erl Queen is coming back at last !"

"Lad!" shouts he to his little son, who is sunning himself near the fence among the juniper-bushes, "lad, yell at the top of your voice, the Altingen people are coming back!"

Black-eyed Hans Joerg jumps to his feet, screens his mouth with his hands, and shouts with all his might: "Heyday! Huzza!"

One of the towers appears, then a view of a wall. Another turn in the road, and the dear old hunting-castle lies full before them. Ännchen jumps to the seat of the carriage. The warm glow of joy is painted on her dimpled cheeks. Ruth presses her hand to her breast, and drinks in with deep delight the welcome scene before her. The chains of the draw-bridge rattle—Uncle Forester, *Grossmütterchen* and Hans, all are assembled in the court-yard, awaiting the home-coming of the cherished wanderers.

"At home! At home, at last!" cries Erl Queen, frantic with joy. Her arms are wide open as she dashes up the stone stairs of her father-house. A heavy burden seems lifted from her soul! She is a child once more, a happy, innocent child! This is her realm, and here alone she is at home, *at home*.



XVIII.

"He reaches the court-yard with toil and dread."

THE wind is icy cold that whistles through the glistening branches. It sweeps with a weary dirge across the barren heath, and tugs at the dark cloak of a wanderer who walks briskly the wintry road. The ground is frozen hard; a glittering coverlet of snow overspreads the brow of earth, and hangs in filmy bridal-veils from shrub and tree.

The gloam of the early winter-night is growing deeper; but the wanderer seems familiar with the way. His eyes linger dreamily on the clover-dell; he pauses and covers them with his hand, as if to shut out the sight of the phantom-spot. All is still and solemn, as though nature were having a holiday, and the valley seems to look up at him like a statue on whose cheeks sculptured tear-drops are permanently hanging. The clouds drift by, and constellation after constellation shine upon him.

Norbert (for it was he) drew his cloak tightly around him and fought his way against the howling wind. The forest began to clear, the foot-path divided, and in the fresh snow the young man could see the imprint of a horse's hoofs, accompanied by the smaller tracks of a dog. A wave of joy flushed his brow, but the smile on his lips died as suddenly away, and he shook his head with bitter disappointment: "It's uncle, riding home with Nimrod by his side!" he whispered to himself. "She? Where is she now? At the capital, engaged, perhaps, in dressing for the court-ball, decked out in sheen of diamonds and clouds of silk, the envied one of all her young companions, surrounded by flattery, the protégée of princes, contented with herself and with her lot! Her Christmas-tree will flash with many lights, and those who are with her on that merry night will be in a more joyful frame of mind than the lonely wanderer through the clover-dell."

Suddenly a light flashed in the midst of the pitchy darkness; through the branches came the cosey gleam of a lamplight. The wanderer welcomed the friendly spark with keen delight, and hastened his steps. A moment later he finds himself standing before the old house, under the

barren linden-trees, where grandmother was wont to relate her fairy-stories. Norbert crept stealthily to the window, bright with the light inside.

In the midst of a group that had gathered around the table sat the dear old lady. A smile was on her face, a natural crown of purest snow upon her brow. She nodded to the rosy girl across the table, and pushed a basket full of apples toward her. The handsome young man by the side of Anna digs his fingers into it, and picks out the finest and largest of the lot ; then he winds his arm around the girl's waist and presents it to her. This is the little wood-nymph's betrothed, no doubt—the great musician from the Residence, who trained her sweet voice, and, in return, asked for her happy little heart. On the left of grandmother sits that tall, fair-haired young rascal, Hans. He is away at school all the year, and this is his second Christmas at home. His hands are busy rooting among a pile of walnuts, pushing gold and silver tinsel hither and thither, or sticking pins with loops attached into the hard shell of the nuts. Who is this, that sits beside Hans? A lady with averted head. The lamplight streaks her brow with gold—one slender, delicate hand playfully snatches the nuts that Hans has piled up

before him—she turns her back—and now she laughs, and raises her eyes, and dangles a golden nut before the nose of Herr Hessbach, who praises her handiwork profusely. The broad, gold band slips down over her hand, she turns her head, and laughingly slaps Hans' greedy fingers for abducting one more apple.

Ruth !” Surprise and joy are mingled in the cry that escapes the wanderer's lips. He leans his hot face against the icy window-panes, and holds his breath, lest he might prematurely disturb the charming vision, so different from the one he had conjectured ! She, whom he imagined far away amidst the gayeties of the world, surrounded by luxurious splendor, far distant from the quiet forest-castle, in whose lonely grounds a passionate youth once sued her for her love—she, whom he expected to find among those who have “drawn the great prizes from the urn of fate,” sits there before him at the humble table of the hunting-lodge, as merry and frolicsome as some fair child that had never tasted higher fortune. Her white hand is busy in bringing order out of a chaos of apples and nuts ; gold-leaf is clinging to her rosy finger-nails.

Norbert was loath to stir from the contemplation

of the happy scene. Half inclined to take to flight before the haughty eyes that have so relentlessly pursued him since the day they first flashed on him, he lingers—in spite of his resolution never again to seek her, and marvels at the miracle : Erl Queen at home, *his* home !

The old forgotten scenes awake anew in his enchanted heart. He sees himself standing again before the marble pedestal in the castle-park, as he bends his knee in profound humility, while she turns away and says . . .

Norbert clinches his teeth, and turns to go.

“The man without a future need not avoid thee, Erl Queen !” mutters he defiantly. “I did not seek thee—thou thyself hast crossed my path !”

He starts for the door and enters ; his footsteps echo through the narrow hall, his hand is on the latch and—he is once more among his own.

“Norbert !” cry joyous voices. Ännchen, Hans, *Grossmütterchen* are wrapped in his strong arms. His cousin’s betrothed holds out a brother’s hand—only *one* stands aloof in chilly silence—Ruth.

Norbert looks at her : the cloak falls from his shoulders, snatched away by young Hans. On his breast glitters—the cross ! He advances slowly toward her.

"Have you *no* welcome for me, Fräulein von Altingen?"

A vivid scarlet spreads over the girl's pale face, and she holds out her hand to him: "God's greeting, Captain Sangoulème! I am glad to see you once again, *at home!*"

What the young châtelaine says is no mere phrase, he knows it well. Her eyes, for once, betray her feeling heart.

"I did not expect to meet *you* here in the forest-home!" continues he, "presuming you were spending winter in the city!"

"Since my father's death," replied the Erl Queen with downcast eyes, "I have returned to Altingen—*for good.*"

"Two years already? And Ännchen never wrote me a word of it?"

"Norbert, you are a captain now, and have the cross!" chimed in Hans, and examined Sangoulème's decoration: "That's the cross you received for saving the ship, is it not? Oh, we read all about it in the newspapers! What a famous man you have become!"

Involuntarily Norbert's eyes seek Ruth's; hers are cast humbly on the floor—a burning blush of shame is on her brow.

"Here you come, and surprise us all again!" cries grandmother. Her eyes are dim with tears of joy, but she shakes her head with some solemnity. "Why do you deprive us of the pleasure of anticipation every time, you dear, perplexing child?"

Norbert draws her hand tenderly to his lips. "As soon as I arrived at Wilhelmshaven, I secured my leave and hastened homeward. I had no need to write. I knew that I could reach you sooner than a letter!"

"Here is my sweetheart, Norbert!" exclaimed Ännchen with sparkling eyes. "Come, look at him! What do you think of him? Leader of an orchestra, composer and poet; he playst he violin, the piccolo and 'cello——"

"And skat and sixty-six to boot!" breaks in that famous worthy. "Yes, you are to be envied, my little bride!"

"Come with me, Norbert, and let me show you my collection of minerals!" shouts Hans. "More than two hundred and eighty bits of rock of every kind!"

"Let him have his supper first!" suggests the practical grandmother, and wards off the jolly busybodies. "Come with me to the dining-room,

my darling lad, my brave young mariner !” And again the gallant captain passes from one embrace to another.

What joy, what confusion was theirs ! At last comparative quiet is restored, and they are gathered around the large center-table. Uncle Forster has returned from his nocturnal ramble with the icicles depending from his beard. Outside the noise of a horse’s hoof is heard.

“ Old Lenz has just come with the lantern ! ” reports Hans, “ and Suwaroff is being led from the stable ! ”

Ruth has risen, and is taking leave of her friends.

“ May I have the honor of escorting you home, Fräulein von Altingen ? ” Norbert stands before her, tall and stately ; a tawny beard now frames his face, and his grave eyes are wistfully bent upon hers.

“ You must be tired,” stammers Ruth, half in alarm. “ Lenz is with me, and nothing will befall me ! Are you not too tired ? You have travelled all day long from Kirchdorf——”

“ If that is your only care,” replies he with a smile, and unbuckling his sword, “ I’ll take it for granted that you accept my company. The night is beautiful—the moon has risen and the cold wind

subsided. To me it is the rarest treat to wander through a German forest."

Farewell was quickly said. Suwaroff paws the ground impatiently, and Norbert extends a timid hand to assist Ruth in mounting. But she turns quickly aside and cries: "Lenz, lead the horse behind us; I will walk home."

And with a friendly smile she joins de Sangoulème. "I thank you, Captain, but I prefer to chat with you on level ground! Good night, Hans!"

Like a flash she stoops and gathers a handful of snow. "Remember me!" And the white charge flies full into the face of the boy.

"It shall be returned with interest in the morning!" threatens the little man, endeavoring to wrest himself from Ännchen's restraining arms to return fire at once: "Ännchen is holding me fast, or I would begin the battle at once!"

"I'll send my second to you to-morrow," cries Erl Queen, "good night, little nut-cracker!" and away she flies over the crisp, white snow.

The slender form by the side of Sangoulème disappears behind the snow-bedizened fir-trees.

"Hans swears by the Lady of Altingen," jested the handsome Captain; "you seem to get along most famously together!"

"No doubt of that!" ejaculated Ruth as gayly. "We were always the best of comrades, and considered it huge fun whenever we could play each other a trick. I *like* to tease, and found a lively double in my young friend Hans, with whom I have wiled away many a lonely hour in this secluded spot."

"You call your sojourn here a lonely one, and yet you seem to choose it of your own sweet will. Does not your mother live with you at Altlingen?"

The young châtelaine stopped abruptly in her walk. A moonbeam dashed over her face, revealing two stern eyes that now looked straight at Norbert.

"My mother has married again. I hear but seldom from her, and my replies are curter still and even rarer. We never liked each other, and I believe she is grateful to God that he sundered the sorry tie that existed between us."

"Do you live here all alone?" asked he tremulously. "Why did you not remain in the city?"

Ruth hung her head. "I spent three winters there, and became familiar with the ways of society and all its irksome pleasures. They grew repulsive to me," and she lifted her head defiantly.

"Things were different from what they seemed. I hate people who grin and smile, while their tongues are steeped in concentrated gall. I saw through their intrigues, and learned to hate and dread their serpent ways ! I am not suited to a life that necessitates a hypocrisy : I spoke what I thought and should have left unsaid. I saw what hundreds of others overlooked, and condemned what they would have me praise ! "

"The mistress of Altingen is too proud to submit to the dictates of a capricious world ! " said Sangoulème pointedly.

Ruth looked at him furtively, but vouchsafed no reply. They had come to where the road divided ; a broad avenue led through the forest direct to Altingen ; a footpath wound through the clover-dell.

" Shall we go through the valley ? " asked Ruth timidly. " We'll reach the castle quicker, although the way is rather more laborious. But the snow-clad clover-dell is gorgeous in the moonlight, and I want to show you my kingdom in all its glory," she added with a merry smile.

" I'll follow where you lead ! " cried Norbert. " It's one adventure more to meet the Erl Queen without her will-o'-the-wisp."

The girl laughed. "Are you thinking of our first meeting?" asked she coyly.

"I am dreaming of the midsummer night I carried a little goblin form in my arms across the brook. How long a time stretches betwixt then and now!"

Ruth was silent. From the lonely dale an icy breeze was blowing on them, scattering the snow over their heads. The moonlight girdled the edge of the forest with a narrow silver band; the alders in the valley looked like frozen apparitions whose white arms beckoned to the rambles with intermittent gestures. Erl Queen stepped lightly over the crackling snow; the slope was smooth with ice, and the wind was tugging quaintly at her gown. Great stones obstructed the path, covered with ice and snow. Ruth tottered and clutched the overhanging branches of the firs—a sturdy arm came quickly to her rescue, and beside her stood Sangoulème's stalwart form. He took her little hand in his, and safely guided her through the dark valley.

"How long will you remain with us?" asks she timidly. "Now that you are a Captain, you will not be able to enjoy as much freedom as formerly, I presume! You have become a famous man,

Captain ! Your heroic deeds have been heralded throughout the world, and every newspaper has extolled your bravery. Ännchen brought me your letter with glad tidings of the cross of honor with which the rescuer of the *Nelson* was decorated. Prince Leopold also wrote me of it, and asked for my congratulations for his friend."

"The man without a future" smiled softly. His noble profile was sharply outlined against the white snow-hill beside which they walked. "I shall only remain during the holidays," replied Norbert hurriedly, "and spend my furlough in a visit to my native land. Later on I have an appointment at Paris with Prince Leopold."

Again they were silent. Only the alder-branches whispered in the wind. They came to the brook, which was as still as ice could make it.

"Do you remember the night?" He stooped low to gaze into her upturned face. The snow-clad ice crackled beneath their feet, while his cloak blew protectingly around her slender form.

"I never forgot it for a moment, when I was here alone in the clover-dell!" whispered Erl Queen. "My solitary haunt is seldom disturbed by the presence of a human being." Their path

ascended past the tall oak-trees. The icicles scintillated in the silvery glow, and the lights from castle Altingen rent the fog-veil.

Now they had reached the drawbridge ; behind them in the avenue flashed the light from Lenz's lantern, and Suwaroff's hoofs were heard crunching the snow.

" 'Foresters' are going to be my guests tomorrow ! " said Ruth. " May I have the pleasure of numbering you among them ? " Her voice faltered, and the little hand slipped slowly from its hold and reached for the bell-rope. Her eyes were mutely pleading.

" Would it offend you, if I did not come ? " asks he huskily. His brow is clouded and his eyes avoid hers.

" It would convince me that you are irreconcilable ! " replied the girl, with downcast eyes, " and yet you said to me when we parted last, that all should be forgiven and forgotten. You must not offend me, anew ! "

He held out his hand and grasped the trembling, delicate fingers impetuously.

" No, far be that from me ! " replied Norbert passionately. " You yourself invited me to come ! Of my own accord I should never have set foot in

castle Altingen again. I vowed that to you once; but you yourself have given me back the pledge; and I thank you for the favor, which restores me to your friendship! Good night, Fräulein Ruth! I will accompany my family tomorrow!"

Norbert released Ruth's hand and walked hastily away. His stalwart form disappeared like a shadow in the gloom of the castle-walls.

Ruth clasped her hands convulsively, and leaned her head heavily against the cold oak panels. She gazed wistfully after him, and the wind kissed the tears from her cheeks—how poor was she—though mistress now of Altingen!

Lenz came at last with the lantern, and Suwaroff shook the snow from his mane. The old servant gave the bell a vigorous pull—too bad the Baroness had been compelled to wait.

"A cold night!" ventured he, in excuse of the delay, "the icy roads are almost impassable."

Ruth nodded her head in silence, and drew her mantle tightly around her shoulders. The draw-bridge rattled, the heavy bolts were withdrawn. The girl dashed across the bridge and over the court-yard in breathless haste, and bounded as fast as she could up the broad stairway to her own room. Over one of the chairs a panther-

skin was thrown, and before it Ruth fell on her knees and buried her face in the shining hair. It was not the first time that the Erl Queen sought refuge and relief for her heavily burdened heart before the gift of her friend.





XIX.

and if thou'rt not willing, then force I'll employ !”

It had grown dark early. Grandmother sits in the high-backed easy-chair, which her stately grandson has carefully wheeled beside the large Dutch-tile stove, diffusing now a cosey glow throughout the room. The flickering firelight is reflected on the snow-white floor, and throws auroral beams over the frail form of the old lady, attired in her best black silk dress and lace-cap, and awaiting the assembling of her grandchildren in order to repair to the castle, where the Christmas-tree will be lighted up by the mistress of Altingen. By her side sits Captain Sangoulème.

“Are you still relating fairy-stories in the twilight, *Grossmütterchen* ?” asks he softly, and strokes the withered hand of the old lady tenderly. “How long ago is it now, since I heard you tell the Myth of the Northern Prince ?”

Grandmother smiled. "Children of *your* age make their own fairy-stories, and wind them up to suit themselves. Whether the love-lorn prince wins the hand of the chosen princess, or snatches the pretty shepherdess from the jaws of the dragons and giants of destiny—depends entirely upon himself."

"You think, then, that *nothing* is lacking but one's own hearty good will?" Norbert's voice was changed.

"Firm will and dauntless courage, yes, my son!" rejoins the old lady with strange solemnity. "At least, that is the case with hearts which reckon earnestly and with abiding faith in the power of love. Norbert," continued she with increased emotion, bending his head gently back, so that the firelight fell full upon his handsome face, "you are like the prince that went forth to seek love, and you have found it—but you persist in gainsaying its victory. To-night Baroness Ruth will light the Christmas candles for all of us—the bright, friendly stars, by whose gentle glow one can read that which is hidden deeply in the human heart. Do not close yours, my darling. Let her see that therein burns a holy fire for her, for her alone—the fire of Love!"

“Grandmother!” The young man turns his troubled face from the light and presses his cold hand to his brow: “I speak of Love, *to her?* Never!” cries he passionately. “To be told by the mistress of Altingen, once more, what none but she can say so bitterly in answer to a sailor’s honest suit?”

“You think Ruth proud and heartless,” continued the old lady, “but you misjudge and wrong her utterly. No child could be more simple, more sincere and unassuming! God knows how tenderly I love the girl; she has crept into my heart as if she were my own child, and I can truly say, that I have done all in my power to guide aright the little motherless waif! Norbert,” the voice of the old lady melts in warmth and tenderness, “you have always been my favorite grandchild! For the rest I would have gladly given my life, but for you I would almost sacrifice my eternal salvation! And now you are about to go out again into storm and danger to make my life a burden with anxiety. Daily and hourly my thoughts have been with you, of whom I never knew whether the sky still stretched above you, or whether the treacherous waters had claimed you for their own! Whether

fever's deadly poison was galloping through your veins, and faithless friends had all forsaken you in misery ! God knows, Norbert, how much I have suffered from this constant suspense ; yet I could never have borne so well the troubled hours but for that other soul that trembled for you, that other hand that was lifted in prayer for you—the young and loving heart that came to console your feeble grandmother and in thought pursued with her your long and tedious cruises on far-distant waters.”

Norbert was strangely thrilled. “Who ?” cried Norbert. Grandmother bent gently over him.

“Ruth !” answers she with infinite tenderness.

“Ruth ?” cries Norbert, as though in a sweet dream. His eyes stare vacantly into the flickering firelight.

“See, Norbert,” pleads the old lady, “you are aware of the changed condition of affairs in France. Your father’s brothers all are dead. The eldest died childless ; the only son of the second, the youngest, perished in a duel six months ago. You are the only heir to the de Sangoulème estates. The French courts have made inquiries about you, and your uncle has furnished them with all the necessary documents to establish your identity. Your

father's only surviving sister, a proud old lady, is ready to become reconciled to you and to receive you as her only, beloved nephew."

"How passing kind!" exclaimed the young man bitterly.

"From her standpoint it is, decidedly so," said the old lady gravely. "Your father was cut off by all his family on account of his *mésalliance*—disinherited by his own father, because he preferred your beautiful mother, the German governess, to a lady of the highest rank; it is said that royal blood coursed in her veins. Your Aunt Angélique desires to meet you; she is ready to give you, with her love, a fortune of considerable magnitude, which, joined to your name and fame, will lend you a position in the world, of which thousands dream, but never realize. Do you want to remain a *lonely man*? At Altingen there beats a heart for you, that has followed you wherever you went in agonizing fear, with prayer and hope—a heart that deserves your love for its staunch and tested loyalty, as no other woman's on earth. It is Christmas-tide, Norbert: let the Christmas-tree lights be your guiding-star to happiness! Go to Ruth, and tell her, how deeply you love her; take her with you as your beloved wife to your Aunt

Angélique ! Go on your wedding-trip to the Champagne ! ”

“Grandmother, be silent !” It was a cry of untold anguish that broke from the young man’s lips. He jumped to his feet, and paced the room impatiently. His fists were clinched, his lips convulsively closed, lest the terrible words “I love her !” might escape.

At last he paused before the old lady.

“Never, grandmother !” said he sternly, “never will I speak of love to the mistress of Altingen. I will start for the Champagne in the morning, but not to wind the golden chain of my aunt’s money round my neck ; I cannot bear to remain ashore ; I famish on the land, and choke in this narrow horizon. I must go back to my beloved sea—it is my only home ! Why do you tremble for me ? The sea means well by me—best of all, if it will condescend to keep me evermore !”

“Norbert !” The old lady’s voice is choked with tears. An expression of deepest pity comes into the young man’s face ; he stoops and winds his arms tenderly around grandmother’s frail shoulders.

“Forgive me, dearest, best of mothers !” he whispers excitedly. “I have allowed a feeling to

overcome me I thought conquered long ago. Ask anything of me, I will do anything in my power, only not that one thing—speak to Ruth.”

“And why not, you strange lad?” asks she, shaking her head softly. “Do you not love her?”

At last it wells and surges to the surface, like an angry flood, this thing that has long been confined to the narrow chamber of his innermost heart. The ice is broken at last, the burden thrown off, and what he has jealously hidden from every human eye save one, springs into light and life. With his head buried in the old lady’s lap, Norbert confesses the deep and hopeless passion of his life. He tells her of the bitter, agonizing hour in the garden, of the parting, made permanent by the ungovernable pride of the young girl. The old lady shakes her head in silence, and smiles wistfully. No, Norbert will not speak a second time of love—she understands now, and lays her hand benignly on his handsome, still defiant head, and kisses the brow behind which love and pride are fighting such a desperate battle.

“Farewell! I cannot kneel a second time for all the happiness on earth.”

On both sides of the drawbridge the torches

are burning, throwing blood-red lights over the glittering snow-fields and wrapping the gray walls of the castle with glaring sheets of red, that seem to palpitate in the wind. The sky is hung with clouds that pour their blinding flakes incessantly in the world's lap.

Streams of light issue from every window of Castle Altingen ; the first soft chords of a Christmas anthem are floating through the air, followed by loud and jubilant exclamations of surprise and glee. Down in the basement the servants of the castle are having their Christmas celebration. Large and small, old and young, each has found a little corner laden with gifts in the green Christmas-tree.

Upstairs in the large ancestral-hall light after light begins to sparkle. Baroness Ruth glides softly to and fro, arranging the gifts for her beloved ones. At last, when all is finished the young châtelaine kneels in silent prayer before the Christmas-crèche and implores heaven to bestow on Castle Altingen and its inmates its choicest, fullest Christmas benediction.

The mistress of Altingen never looked more proud, more lovely or more charming, than when she threw the folding-doors wide open.

“What is it, Norbert?” whispers Ännchen suddenly, amidst the laughter of the jubilee. “You look like an image of stone. What have you there? *Oh*, how beautiful, how lovely! What does it mean?”

The young seaman stands immovable before the place to which Ruth has blushinglly conducted him. In his hand he holds a white sheet—a pretty little water-color—and his eyes hang raptly on it. The picture is a hasty, but exquisite sketch of the clover-dell with its strangely crippled, ghostly willows and alder-bushes. A brook winds through the narrow valley. The moon shines full upon it, and, wading through the dancing wavelets, is visible a youth’s tall figure. A dark cloak hangs from his shoulders, and on his breast nestles a pale child in a white gown; its head lies on the youth’s broad shoulder, round which the tangled locks of the child are blowing.

“*Erl Queen*”—says the signature in the corner.

“*Oh*, how beautiful, how charming! What does it mean?” persists Ännchen, as she leans over her cousin’s shoulder. The sketch falls from his hand, and he starts, as if he had been suddenly awakened from a dream. His eyes seek Ruth’s.

She is standing beside the venerable pastor of Kirchdorf, and her face is thoughtfully raised to his. Her golden hair gleams like a wreath of glory round her small, delicate head, and a quiet, happy smile flits over her sweet face.

Norbert presses forward and pauses before her :
“ Did you paint this picture for *me*, Fräulein von Altingen ? ”

She scans his face narrowly. The expression of his eyes drives the tell-tale blood to her cheeks.

“ Yes, it was the work of my leisure hours ! I did not know what else to give you, and desired that a memento of that night should accompany you on your cruise ! ”

“ I thank you ! ” is all he could say, but his eyes spoke volumes.

Hans came and dragged his uncle-captain away with him to show him some new mineralogical treasure, and Ännchen's sweetheart approached with a countenance bathed in happiest smiles, to kiss with deepest gratitude the hand of the Lady of Altingen. His ideal wish, to possess a Wagner collection, has been gratified, at last. Ruth has placed the works of the famous master under the Christmas-tree for the future husband of her friend. The ancestral hall of Altingen, usually

so quiet and sedate, rings with the wildest exclamations of delight.

Hans and Ännchen drag a large box across the carpet—grandmother opens the mysterious chest, and begins to unpack the treasures, Norbert's gifts—miracles of art from lands barbaric, marvels of the tropics.

"Norbert," cries the old lady, "will you not distribute your presents?" Sangoulème shakes his head; he is still engaged in rapt contemplation of his miniature clover-dell.

"I do not know the tastes of the ladies," he stammers with embarrassment, "and beg most urgently, that you will one and all select whatever you may fancy!"

"Huzza! Then I want this dagger, and this large ivory horn!" shouts Hans with glee. "And this cocoa-nut, too, and a couple of shells, and this sea-star!" And he proceeds to lay claim to everything within his reach.

"Ah, Norbert, this shawl is for me, is it not? Heavens, how beautiful! And these gleaming beads! What are they? Pearls, Norbert?"

And before he can make reply they are dangling from the girl's neck. "Norbert, won't you give this Turkish pipe to my sweetheart? Ah.

what lovely coral ! I *always* wanted just such a chain to wear with my pink dress ! ”

“ But children, children, you must not be the first ! ” exclaimed grandmother, mortified by the greediness of her young hopefuls. “ Please, dear Ruth, examine the contents of the box and choose for yourself. There will be nothing left, if these pirates have any further access to it. ”

Ruth has been turning the leaves of her Hessbach's music sheets. She looked wistfully at the old lady and shook her head with a smile. “ A gift that one chooses for one's self has no value ; it would seem nothing more than a curious trifle from a foreign land, not a memento of the seafarer Sangoulème, unless presented by his own hands ! ”

Norbert drew quickly near ; his eyes scanned the contents of the box. A curious smile hovered around his lips, as he lifted from it a bronze vase of curious shape and exquisite workmanship, which he presented to the mistress of Altingen with a softly whispered word.

Ruth received the lovely gift with warmest admiration. She thanked him twice and thrice, examining the curious treasure critically, vainly seeking a key to the wonderful flourishes and arabesques of the engraving. “ What is it ? Where

does it come from ? What does it mean ?" asked she, all in a breath, with shining eyes.

Around Sangoulème's handsome mouth plays an amused smile. "It is a water-bowl with which the maidens of Malmö dip the water from the Saluö on holidays ; and while the festive procession moves through the town, they scatter the crystal drops over the heads of the young men they wish to encourage to woo them."

Ruth's hands tremble as they hold the fateful bowl. Her blushing face drops low on her breast. She makes no reply, but the tender look which she bestows on Sangoulème's gift, no longer says in proud defiance : "I am the mistress of Altingen !"

Uncle Forester had departed home soon after the initial Christmas celebration. Mademoiselle Marion has repaired to the dining-room to superintend the clearing of the tea-table, and grandma Forester is having a quiet chat with Ruth, who is on her knees before the old lady. "Aunt Ruth is laughing, but there are tears in her eyes !" whispers Hans into Ännchen's ear.

"Are you demented ?" is that young damsel's unequivocal reply, while she proceeds to try on the crêpe-shawl before the mirror in all manner

of fantastic ways. From time to time Herr Hessbach casts a loving smile at the pretty young girl from the piano at which he is seated, playing the prelude of an anthem, for the hundredth time, it seems to Hans. Norbert alone is apparently interested in the music; he is leaning over the instrument, and his eyes are riveted upon the portrait of Sir Brechthald which faces the open door leading to Ruth's apartment. Hans stands in the doorway, dividing his attention between a large, red apple and a delicious almond-tart, but in spite of this absorbing manoeuvre his eyes are fixed intently upon grandmother and Ruth, who seem to have profound secrets still between them, although it is now *after* Christmas.

"Oh, you darling *Grossmütterchen*," cries Ruth suddenly, and throws her arms around the old lady's neck. "Yes, yes, you are right! It *is* my place to help! But how, how shall it be done?—I have it," exclaims she after a brief study, so loudly and joyously that Anna appears inquiringly in the door. "Depend upon me, and all will be well!" whispers Ruth quickly into the old lady's ear.

Lenz comes with a trayful of glasses in which the Christmas punch is steaming. Like a flash

Ruth is by his side, and whispers something in his ear. The faithful old servant looks speechless with surprise. He smiles in a vacant sort of way, and risks the question : "Is this a Christmas joke, Baroness?"

"Not in the least!" replied the Lady of Altingen, in a tone that brooks no further doubt. "Do exactly as I tell you, do you hear?"

Lenz stammers an excuse. Fräulein Marion relieves him of the tray; the old man walks slowly to the door, where he turns back once more, as though expecting still a countermand.

"So you are going to leave us to-morrow?" says Ruth to Sangoulème, who looks strangely perturbed. She touches her glass to his, and sips her steaming brew as though in glee at his departure.

"Yes," replies Norbert simply, "I am expected in the Champagne."

"Really? And would you risk imprisonment if you remained away, Captain?"

How shameful! She laughs and banters, while his heart is breaking with the agony of this new parting.

"Nothing more than a reproach!" says Sangoulème, defiantly almost. Her frivolous manner wounds him to the heart.

“And why do you go so early? Why not wait for the sleigh?”

“I prefer a walk through the clover-dell!” says he curtly, and turns his face away. His gloom is lost upon her. Fräulein von Altingen is suddenly transformed into a merry vixen, and he knows not what to make of her.

“Through the clover-dell? To-night? God forbid!” titters she. “Ghosts are stalking about, M. de Sangoulème! Are you not afraid of the Erl Queen? But as you are bent upon going, and risking a new encounter with that uncanny alder-sprite, we shall be the last to detain you, although your going fills us with dismay!”

Her conduct was incomprehensible to Norbert. Even while she spoke the last words a suppressed laugh hung on her sweet lips. “Away from here!” mutters Sangoulème through his clinched teeth, and bows before Ruth with a civil phrase of thanks. He goes in search of Mademoiselle Marion to take leave of her.

“Adieu, Captain Sangoulème, I wish you many joys upon the way!” cries Ruth, with a voice that is choked with laughter.

Norbert comes back and extends his hand to grandmother. The mistress of Altingen is

nowhere to be seen. In the Christmas-room Hans' jubilant voice is heard. No doubt she is there, playing mad pranks with the boy, forgetful of the fact that on the threshold tarries one who is leaving his happiness, his life, his all, behind him in the quiet forest-castle !

Norbert's pulses hammer fiercely as he bounds downstairs. His heart is full of bitterness, and his honest soul revolts at this deceitful girl, who plays so heartlessly with his most sacred feelings ! "It has all been a sham and a delusion !" groans he in his inmost heart, and throws the door to the court-yard sternly open.

How strangely quiet all is ! Not a soul seems stirring in the house ! Not a sound to be heard in the court, not a light to be seen in the basement of the castle ! From the direction of the drawbridge, only, gleams a flickering torch.

Sangoulème wraps his warm mantle tightly around his shivering form. He strides diagonally across the square ; not a look will he send back to her windows, whence the strains of a merry waltz come floating down ! Her last greeting—a waltz !

He hurries off with passionate vehemence . . . What is this ? A black abyss yawns at his feet ; the torches on the towers shine on sable planks

and rafters . . . Ha ! *the bridge is drawn.* How shall he make his escape ? Go back in search of aid ? How mortifying ! Is there nobody, nobody, who will help him out of this dilemma ? "Lenz !" he cries, and starts for the castle again—but no one hears him, no one comes !

"A prisoner !" he mutters with a smile, half amused, half provoked. "But, no, Erl Queen, I'll not return to you !" Again he paces the court-yard and pauses under the eaves of the castle, reflecting how to make his escape. The snow crunches under the weight of a pair of little feet ; a dark, shadowy form emerges from the gloom of the wall and stops his progress with wide-open arms, and a sweet, familiar voice cries faintly : "Stay !"

He starts back in surprise.

"'And if thou'rt not willing, then force I'll employ !'" continues the voice. "In the name of the Erl Queen, Captain Sangoulème, you are my prisoner !"

"Ruth ! Ruth ! Why are you playing such a cruel game with me ?" groans Norbert, with bleeding heart and quivering pulses. "Have you no pity for me ? What do you mean ?"

Ruth winds her arms around his neck.

"I mean to hold you fast, and carry you off to the Erl Queen's castle, you hard, hard-hearted man! You have under-estimated her forces and are about to forsake her, not knowing that the water-sprites of the clover-dell can devise ways and means with which to capture and hold fast forever the happiness that dares to fly from them!"

The red torch-light illumines her delicate features; the dark veil falls from her head, while whirling snow-flakes glisten in the golden hair.

"Ruth! Sweet, sweet Ruth!" cries Norbert transported with joy.

With an arch smile the girl raises her arm. The bronze bowl from Malmö glitters in her hand, that sprinkles now a world of water-stars. Scattering some on his bended head, she whispers softly: "On holier night I could not draw from purer stream! Come, thou, whom I have chosen, whom alone I have loved, come and woo me!"

"Erl Queen! You are mine, mine now—at last—for time and for eternity!"

Once more the torches on the wall flicker and flare up, before dying out altogether under the white snow-veil that falls noiselessly from the overhanging branches of the fir-trees.

Upstairs in the rooms of castle Altingen the

real Christmas jubilee has but just begun ! *Love* has outspread its wings, and sheds new light into two young hearts, that, having lost, have found each other for all time to come.

For the present, Captain Sangoulème has seen the white sails of his beloved ship for the last time. For him the ocean roars alone in dreams and the storm-winds that whistle round the eaves of the old fairy-castle bring tidings from the lonely shores, and repeat to him the story of the young prince who went out to meet *Love*, and *has found* it at last in the very fullness of felicity.

Midnight has long passed by. In the distance sleigh-bells are jingling. The north-wind rustles through the clover-dell, and the snow has ceased to fall. A large, bright star hangs over castle Altingen, and watches over the happy sleep of the young *châtelaine*.





XX.

At the Residence Ruth's betrothal to Sangou-
lème caused quite a stir. Princess Josephine was
the first to send a loving letter full of warm con-
gratulations. Prince Leopold telegraphed from
Paris in the same humorous strain that characterized
his every action. The message contained the single
exclamation : "What next !" It was followed by
a letter, in which the young Prince offered his
services as "best man."

It was never known how Fräulein von Nievend-
loh received the tidings of the unexpected event.
For several winters afterwards, the pretty Lady-
in-waiting flitted from ball to ball, from Bible-
lesson to sermon, from church to opera and ballet,
growing more austere and rigid from year to year.
At last she flung the satin slippers in disgust from
her little feet, took up the rosary, and walked
steadfastly in the traces of Her Excellency, the

Mistress-of-the-Chase. Woe to the unfortunate mortal, who failed to find favor in the eyes of the spiteful spinster ; he learned ere long that satan feeds his flames with wicked tongues.

In due time Herr Hessbach married the little wood-nymph, and placed at her feet the ample results of his operatic successes. Ännchen herself has been heard and admired in various concerts ; but when, ere long, a little black-eyed babe lay cradled in her arms, laughing up at her with her husband's glowing eyes, Frau Anna confined her musical talent to nursery airs and lullabies. Herr Hessbach sits in deep study, and listens to her with rapt attention, exclaiming with a musing shake of his handsome head : " Just notice the *expression* with which the little woman sings ! "

Ruth and Norbert have gone to the Champagne upon their wedding-trip. The sinking sun lies with a parting glow upon the foam-tipped billows, weaving a final welcome to the handsome couple on board the gallant cruiser. The wind sings merrily in the sails ; soft whispers rise from the dancing waves, and a sea-gull flaps its snowy wings and carries skyward in its beak the alder-sprig which the young wife has dropped into the water—the

Erl Queen's playful salute to her magic sisters of
the mysterious deep.

* * * * *

Years have passed. A sailor-lad strolls through
the clover-dell "God's greeting, Altingen!"
shouts he, and breaks from the tree a shining
alder-branch for his young mother. His eyes are
dark, but his curly locks are a golden-brown.
His name is Leopold de Sangoulème.

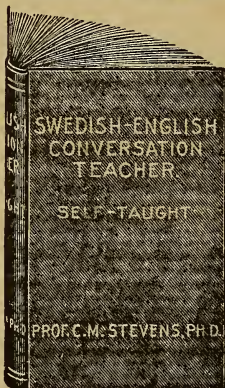
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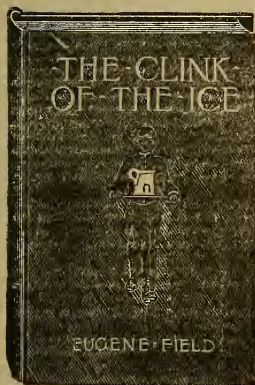
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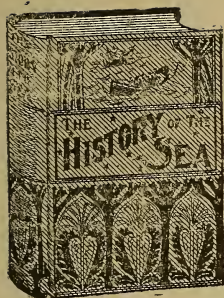
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